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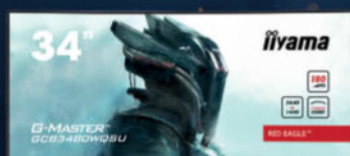
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"TAKING THE THEME PARK SIM TO AN EVEN HIGHER LEVEL OF FUN"



One of my standout PC gaming memories from the 1990s was first playing *Theme Park*, Peter Molyneux's groundbreaking theme park creation and management simulator. And, since then, this particular sub-genre of sims has continued to make its home on PC, from the *RollerCoaster Tycoon* series, to Frontier Developments' excellent *Planet Coaster*.

ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rnicholasj

This month

Realised if he lived in the world of *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* then he'd already be dead. Great!

And now, *Planet Coaster 2* looks to be taking the theme park sim to an even higher level of fun and immersion, with unsurpassed park creation and management on offer.

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



TYLER WILDE

Twitter

@tyler_wilde

This month

Decided he vibed more with ancient Egypt than now. Commanded all to call him Pharaoh Wilde.



HARVEY RANDALL

Twitter

@HJRwithpen

This month

Watched as images of hot, topless gods raked across his vision. Oh, and in action RPG *Hades* he...



MORGAN PARK

Twitter

@MorganRPark

This month

Set up an extreme 3vs3 tiddlywinks competition. The only rule? Bow ties must always be worn.



ROBIN VALENTINE

Twitter

@robinvalentine

This month

Kept jumping magically into books. We had to lock away the Kama Sutra for his own good.

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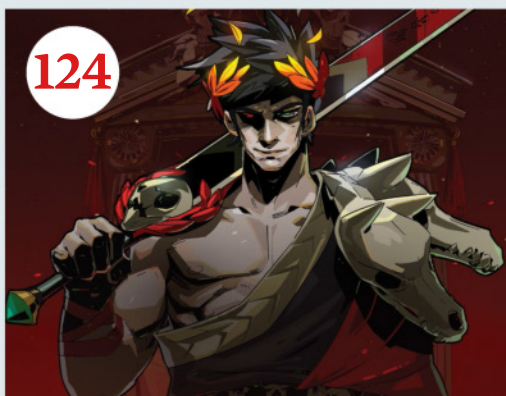
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Pretend this shot is the cast throwing the movie in the bin.

BOMBS AWAY

The **BORDERLANDS** movie is a disastrous flop

As a critic, it's my job to generally treat all things with grace – but I feel pretty confident saying that the *Borderlands* movie, which launched to shocking reviews, has not done well. I trust the opinion of my fellow PC Gamer writer Joshua Wolens who, having sat down and watched the whole thing, dubbed it “tasteless mush that no one involved seemed interested in saving” and “an excuse to buy a bucket of popcorn”.

That critical reception appears to have manifested at the US box office,

via Variety, reporting that *Borderlands the Movie* raked in \$8.8 million in its opening weekend in the States. This is a movie that cost \$115 million to make and an additional \$30 million to market and distribute.

Adding those costs together, that means *Borderlands'* US performance over the weekend earned it about 6%

of what it cost. To put that in perspective, it now needs to sell the same number of tickets roughly 16 additional times just to break even.

BOLL-DERLANDS

Things are so bad that even legendarily awful videogame movie director Uwe Boll is getting some licks in. “My movies were rated R and made more money than this. Now you wish I directed,” Boll wrote on Twitter, “now you wish I directed.” You know you messed up when the master of bad movie adaptations is scoring points off you.

Granted, there are international releases to come, and as Forbes

**IT RAKED IN
\$8.8 MILLION IN ITS
OPENING WEEKEND
IN THE STATES**

UNSUBSCRIBE

TRUMP HITS KICK



Former prez Donald Trump turned up on the Kick stream of banned Twitch streamer Adin Ross. The pair discussed Trump's campaign, his political enemies and crypto, then Ross gifted him a Rolex and the two sat in a Trump-themed Cybertruck listening to Elvis songs. ■ **JW**

COUNTERMEASURE

WHAT'S MINES IS YOURS



Helldivers 2 players have a long history of rejecting the gift of anti-tank mines, so as punishment, Arrowhead decided to give them an ultimatum. If players didn't manage to kill 1.5 billion enemies, they would get the mines whether they liked it or not. ■ **EG**

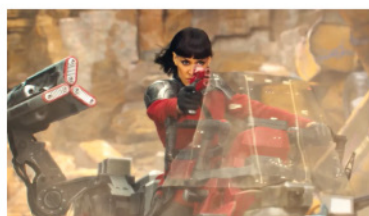


DON'T ASK WHY

DIY LAPTOP



"I'm still amazed that it all came together and actually works," is the assessment of their work after YouTuber Socket Science revealed the DIY laptop they'd spent more than a year building from components. I, too, am amazed, seeing this RX 6600 and Ryzen board squeezed into a tiny chassis. ■ **DJ**



TOP: Do you think Cate Blanchett has fired her agent yet?

ABOVE: You know things are bad when Claptrap is your best character.

reports, 60% of its production budget has already been covered by presales – which just leaves, uh, approximately \$67 million (again, combining production and marketing/distribution costs) to find after the fact before the cash starts flowing.

I'd shuffle in some snide quip here, but I'm feeling a similar way to how I felt looking at *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, which not only lost Warner Bros about \$200 million, but is currently being played by – let me check – 86 whole people on Steam (with a 24-hour peak of 217) at the time of writing. That is to say: sad. It makes me feel sad.

Thinking about the amount of waste that came out of something like this is just frustrating, especially since the *Borderland* series seems characterised by a tendency to miss easy slam-dunks. It's got a killer aesthetic and, for the most part, gameplay that's good fun – I sank about 58 hours into *Borderlands 3* and its respective DLCs.

But other aspects, namely its story and overall direction, have been chronically mismanaged for years, and it's sad to see that bleed over into the movie. I am starting to see why HBO's *The Last of Us* writer Craig Mazin hopped off the movie train before it could become a proper wreck. ■

Harvey Randall

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Keep games alive

If a million people sign a petition, a ban on making multiplayer games unplayable could become law in EU.

Sneak level 100

The *Fallout* show makeup team snuck in a character from the games.

Dragon-light

Dragon Age: The Veilguard has some undemanding specs for such a pretty game.

Disrespectful

After confirming his Twitch ban came from exchanging "inappropriate" messages with a minor, Dr Disrespect deleted the tweet and teased a comeback.

Undemocratic

Helldivers 2 cheats undercut a major order with millions of false bug bits.

Nuked

Modern Warfare Remastered mod H2M got killed by Activision.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is comfortable in the world's most wretched hives of scum and villainy. From Castle Wolfenstein to the Canary

Wharf branch of Costa Coffee, through the executive boardroom of EA and inside the editorial rumpus room of Edge magazine, mingling with villainous malefactors is, unfortunately, part of The Spy's daily bread and butter.

The worst dungeon dimension of blackguard denizens, though? Without doubt, Hollywood. The Spy has summered in The Shivering Isles, better known to the locals as the Realm of Madness, but nothing on that Plane of Oblivion compares to the movie-making heart of LA, and especially not when it comes to videogame movie adaptations, where tanking your own product by doing everything in your power to strip it of what made it popular as a videogame, appears to be a competitive sport.

The Spy's first foray into Hollywood was back in 1993 when, going undercover as John Leguizamo's plunger on the set of the Super Mario Bros movie, she watched first-hand as the world's most famous videogame property was fumbled by Hollywood so hard it almost killed videogame movie adaptations for good. The Spy still has nightmares about those tiny-headed Goombas.

SLIDING DOORS

Fast forward to 2024 and The Spy wonders if, actually, a swift coup de grâce for videogame movie adaptations back in 1993 would have been preferable to the videogame movie landscape gamers are now exposed to. Most recent case in point, the disasterclass Borderlands movie, which not only did PC Gamer call an 'irredeemable mess' on review, but also currently boasts a so-low-it's-almost-funny 9 out of 100 rating online at movie review score aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.

The Spy isn't laughing, though, and that's because The Spy can report that Hollywood, buoyed by the very rare successes of the Sonic the Hedgehog movie series, as well as Pokémon Detective Pikachu, has decided that videogames are, once again, the future of the movie industry, with studios gobbling up rights to make films of



games left, right and centre. And, let The Spy tell you, there's plenty to get worried about.

A Metal Gear Solid film, for example, is currently in development, with Oscar Isaac lined up to play Snake. The big problem, casting and directorial choices aside? Despite the game having a pretty clear story, the studio is reportedly still looking for a suitable story to attach to it.

Next year's big summer blockbuster? The imaginatively named Minecraft: The Movie is incoming courtesy of Warner Bros, and it's starring beefcake Jason Momoa and, of course, Jack Black. The Spy is yawning and/or wishing for a swift death already.

What's more, the creators of Cobra Kai, in partnership with the studio Legendary Entertainment, the maker of the Dune and the Godzilla movie series, are working on a Duke Nukem movie. Finally, The Spy can report

that Hideo Kojima is also working on not just a Death Stranding movie but, reportedly, an entire Death Stranding cinematic universe. An apocalyptic future where the lines between life and death are blurred? No, not the film's plot, but seemingly the future of watching videogame movie adaptations. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy drinks Nespresso with George Clooney.

TAKE TO THE STARS IN THE PLANET HOPPING ADVENTURE-RPG

BEYOND GALAXYLAND

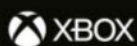
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



MYTHMAKING

Inside **BLACK MYTH: WUKONG**'s four-year Journey to the West

Four years to the day before Game Science released action-adventure *Black Myth: Wukong*, the Chinese studio shot to immediate international attention with the kind of trailer that made a lot of us go, “No way... really?” It looked good. Really good. Lush, strikingly detailed foliage, subtle reflections on the surface of mossy puddles, transformation after transformation showing monkey king Sun Wukong’s deep reservoir of tricks and battle techniques. It seemed too ambitious, too strong a first showing from a studio that, up to that point, had primarily worked on mobile games. It was no coincidence that when Game Science finally let us play *Black Myth*, we started in that same densely forested level.

“One of the things we value is a promise to our game fans. We tried to keep true to what it looked like in 2020, but did a lot of optimisation based on that,” said Game Science in an interview with PC Gamer (the developer I spoke with requested to be credited as a representative of the studio, rather than an individual). And sure enough, the final stage four years later looks true to the original teaser, proving that first demo wasn’t pulling any sleight of hand.

“Blackwind Mountain was one of the first levels that was completed, and we didn’t feel very satisfied with it at

the time,” said Game Science, a hint that this early bit of the game may undersell the adventure that follows.

LONGEST JOURNEY

Even as Game Science downplayed the quality of Blackwind Mountain, though, they promised that *Black Myth*’s third level is on another level, with a mammoth explorable space and a multi-phase boss fight befitting a warrior whom the Buddha had to bury under a mountain just to stop his rebellion against heaven.

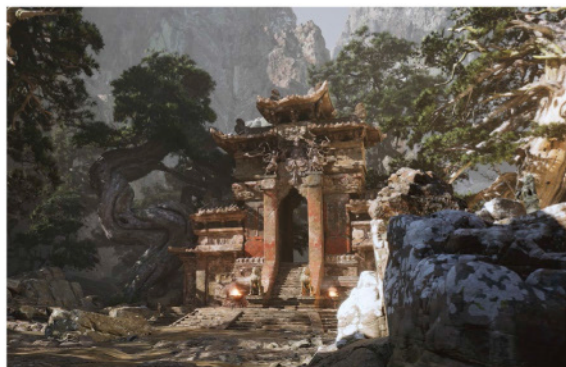
“It took a long time to get this boss right,” Game Science said. “We don’t think any game on the market right now has achieved this kind of interaction with the main character. When you fight him you’re in this very ornate environment, and this character has a deep, complicated relationship with the boss. They don’t want to kill you, because they want to take you in as an apprentice. And there is more than one way to beat him: you can use a different combination of spells, it’s very fluid. But out of every boss, only he has the ability to counter each and every spell and ability the player has.”

Black Myth: Wukong has grown in ambition since that 2020 reveal, when only 20 or so people worked on its initial demo. “We needed to hire more people, but at the time there were not a lot of people who were developing PC/console games [in China], so we opted to release the



“No comment”

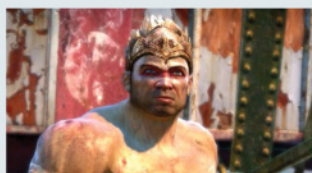
In November 2023, IGN published an extensive report on past sexist remarks from founding members of Game Science. When asked about those remarks for this interview, GameScience responded “no comment” and that it would only answer questions related to the game. When asked about the company’s culture in relation to IGN’s report, Game Science also responded “no comment”.



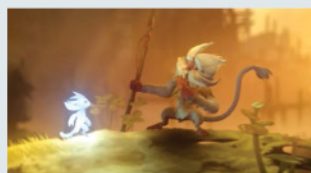
FAR LEFT: I've heard of Big Boss, but this is ridiculous.

LEFT: Photogrammetry may not be as buzz-worthy as it was in 2015, but the results can still be stunning.

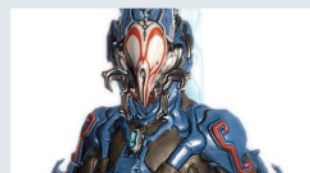
PAST JOURNEYS *Four notable adaptations of Sun Wukong in past games*



ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST
In this sci-fi cinematic platformer, Andy Serkis played Monkey a year before Caesar in Rise of the Planet of the Apes.



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS
Stately monkey warrior Opher teaches Ori new moves throughout the adventure.



WARFRAME
Released a few months after Warframe debuted in China, this suit comes equipped with Wukong's famous staff.



FINAL FANTASY XIV
Dungeon boss Qitian Dasheng rides in on Wukong's famous magic cloud before dishing out some of his famous moves.

trailer so that people could get a good sense of the quality of the game and attract interest from like-minded folks."

Despite hiring more than 100 developers since then, Game Science said the development has been "fairly smooth sailing". That wasn't the case for the last big project that Game Science's founders worked on. As Tencent developers in the 2010s they created the MMO *Asura*, but felt like they were lacking both the experience and technology they needed to make it a hit. They loved the idea of *Asura*, though. Not the MMO bit, but the fact that it was based on 16th-century novel *Journey to the West*, a fantasy fable that's been retold in countless movie and TV productions in and out of China. Adaptations as varied as *Dragon Ball* and the post-apocalyptic adventure game *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* have proven the story endlessly flexible. With a decade more experience, Game Science came back to try it again.

MYTHMAKING

Journey to the West is prime fodder for an action game, if for no other reason than that not one person Wukong and his companions meet on their long trek is normal. Sixteenth century road trips must've been exhausting – every passerby has some sort of trick or special ability up their sleeve, which Game Science has tried to channel into its combat design. "Wukong has very fluid ways of moving and a lot of different transformations," Game Science said. "We hope the audience has space to think through what abilities they should use to conquer each enemy and boss."

Beyond how it will benefit combat, though, *Journey to the West*'s epic scale – it's more than 2,000 pages when translated to English – gives them an immense collection of adventures to pull from. "We think that *Journey to the West* is not simply just about Sun Wukong's journey to the west. Everybody has their own journey, and in *Black Myth: Wukong* we're trying to complete the stories of a lot of the main characters," Game Science said.

The game takes place after the novel, with Game Science doing its best to balance the story for Chinese audiences who already know the book inside and out, and international players who will be coming to many of its characters for the first time. That's been an ongoing localisation challenge, with tweaks to the English localisation seemingly still coming in during its last month before release.

"It's a very difficult game to translate. There's a lot of vocabulary that's very specific. We have to translate an older Chinese that's kind of similar to Old English to the modern Chinese language that we're using, and then from there into English. But in terms of a message to really drive home with the audience, when you peel away the language difference you see that *Journey to the West* has a spirit about it. Everybody has this faith they hold onto... the team didn't really want to make a game that is just all about beating monsters. We wanted to establish the enemies as very dimensional characters, not just another enemy you have to beat." ■

Wes Fenlon

GAME SCIENCE SAID THE DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN "FAIRLY SMOOTH SAILING".

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

WRITE KNIGHT

Elder Scrolls Online's lead writer **BILL SLAVICSEK** on writing in-game literature

Bill Slavicsek is perfectly qualified for fantasy worldbuilding. An incredible tabletop gaming career spanning decades, which included work on the original Star Wars roleplaying game (and writing the Star Wars Sourcebook) and Dungeons & Dragons to name but two, began in the 1980s with answering an ad in the New York Times.

"It was a blind ad for a game editor," he explains. "Turned out it was for West End Games". He would go on to work for TSR and then Wizards of the Coast, writing new stories in existing universes as well as inventing new worlds of his own. In 2011 he interviewed for ZeniMax, where he serves as lead writer and narrative director for ESO today.

"The fact that basically all computer games are based on the model set by role playing games," says Slavicsek, "that was an easy transition. The biggest learning for me was writing dialogue, because I had not done a lot of that. But that

came rather easily as well." Pieces of writing that you can pick up in the game – books, diary entries, notes, etc – are an important part of wordbuilding, and Slavicsek explains that there's no hard and fast rule regarding how long or short they need to be. Whatever is appropriate for that particular 'flavour book' is the length that is used.

RESPECT YOUR ELDER

So important are these discoverable pieces of writing, in fact, that they must adhere to strict guidelines. "We have a whole style guide for every zone, that has themes and culture and background. And we like to say that a lot of what's written in the *Elder Scrolls* universe is from the point of view of the unreliable narrator. So we often write books that contradict each other so that the player can decide what's true, not the book itself."

Sometimes, a book or a letter will be crucial to quest progression, and so that will be in from the beginning of the quest design process. More can and will be added as the process continues; typically, says Slavicsek, a

quest will start with two to six such items, with another six to 12 having been added by the time everything has been finalised.

All ESO writing goes through iterations. Characters are the most likely to be affected, but this can filter down all the way to snippets of in-game lore. "[Sometimes] we have to rebuild something," he says. "We have to help that story get to where it really needs to be, and in that process, a first draft of a letter could change as it has to match what happens for the final part of the quest."

When a new zone is created, work on the in-universe literature for that area starts at a fairly early stage. "The first thing the team does, after everything is approved and we hit the ground running, is we develop a style guide. As I was saying, cultural notes, historic notes. Lore that's from other games that we want to include; places we can expand that lore, or add new lore; characters, bad guys, all of that is in the style guide. And then we develop a flavour book list. This is all the books that we want in the zone that aren't related to a specific quest. All the topics in the style guide become a book, and then we just start writing them."

While 'flavour books' are used in many other games, the ones in ESO need to be specifically *Elder Scrolls*. "We try to write with a modern cadence, but not modern words. We want to make sure that we are always telling an *Elder Scrolls* story, not another game story or another world story. We actually have a Loremaster, and it's the Loremaster's job to help the rest of the team stay on track with that kind of stuff." ■

Luke Kemp

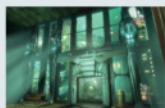
BOOKING IT

Other flavour text in games



THIMBLEWEED PARK

There's a library to be found where you can read snippets of different books.



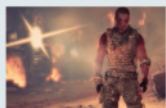
BIOSHOCK

Who can forget all of those *BioShock* audio diaries? All 122 of them (yes really, 122!)



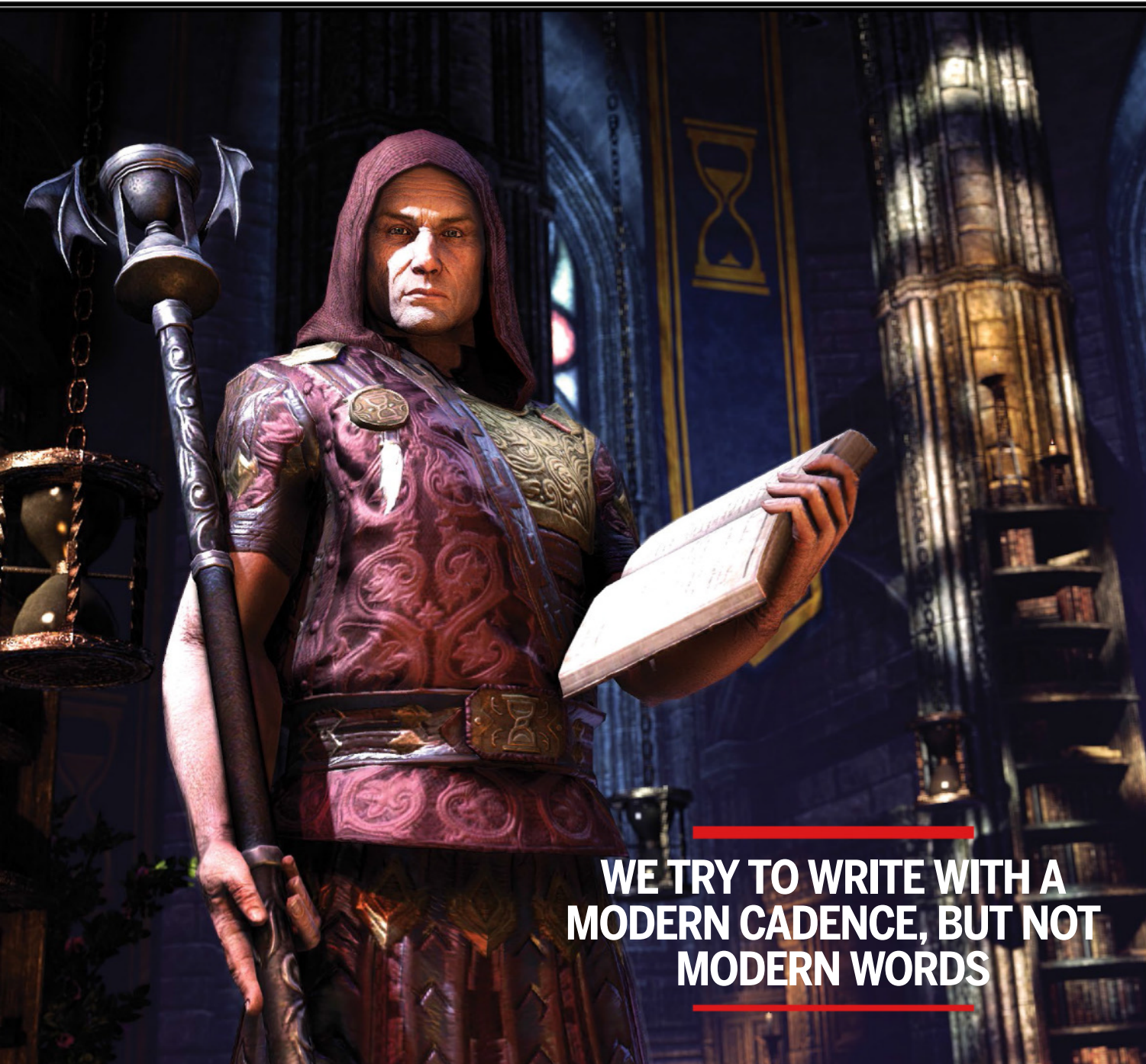
SYSTEM SHOCK REMAKE

Many of the audio logs are just for fun, but some have info crucial to progress.

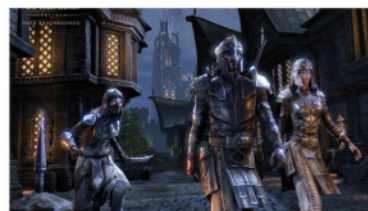
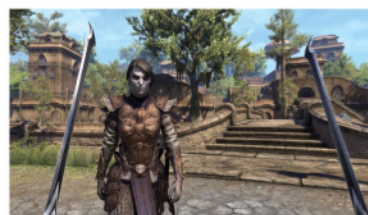


SPEC OPS: THE LINE

The intel that you can find is where a lot of the sobering detail can be found.



WE TRY TO WRITE WITH A MODERN CADENCE, BUT NOT MODERN WORDS



ABOVE: The pen is mightier than the staff that deals 3,362 flame damage over six seconds.

LEFT: "I don't know, something's kind of off; I'm feeling out of swords."



Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



Japanese game makers are now releasing on PC day one as a priority.



ABOVE: For decades Japanese game makers largely ignored PC. Not any more, though.



BELOW LEFT: The Sharp X68000 once ruled PC gaming in Japan, offering big power and arcade perfect ports.

A NEW DAWN

The rise, fall and rise again of **PC GAMING IN JAPAN**

The so-called 'Paso Kon' market (ie katakana's transliteration of 'Pasonaru Computa') in Japan was originally spearheaded in the 1980s by NEC's PC-8800 and, later, its PC-9800. However, in terms of quality, Fujitsu's FM Towns and the Sharp X1, as well as the mighty Sharp X68000 (the latter being the high-end of the Japanese PC gaming experience in the late '80s and early '90s, one that boasted an arcade perfect port of *After Burner*) ended up in a world of their own power-wise, dominating higher-end PC gaming.

Despite this, the home computer market in Japan at the time ended up being led in terms of architecture by ASCII's MSX (a Microsoft-Sony and Panasonic joint venture), while in Europe there was a battle between Commodore's Amiga and the ST from Atari (run by Commodore's former president Jack Tramiel, no less), and so naturally many games and pieces of software were made for them. However, this focus ended quite dramatically in Japan in mid-1992 when Nintendo's incredibly arcade-faithful Super Famicom conversion of *Street Fighter II* came out, and id Software released the groundbreaking *Wolfenstein 3D*, demonstrating it was PCs, not consoles, that had the gaming edge.

But this is also where PC gaming's fall in Japan begins. Big Japanese electronics firm Sony, which had struggled to have a notable share in either the PC or home console market up until that point, then proposed a Sony-made CD peripheral to both Sega and Nintendo, realising it was the future of physical media and, also, the firm's way into the gaming market. However, both Hayao Nakayama and Hiroshi Yamauchi, top players at Sega and Nintendo, foresaw Sony's real intentions and refused. Sony then moved to what was probably always its final aim, to release its own PlayStation console with an aggressive marketing plan to target



DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI

Correspondent from Japan since 1996, and for Future Publishing exclusively since 2016, Marco is able to spot, report and foresee the new trends in the gaming market covering the whole Japanese production, from consumer to arcades. He owns far too many retro Japanese PCs.

the new demographic of so-called 'casual' gamers. And to not just do so as other firms had done before, but to directly own and fund gaming software houses and then force them to release their games exclusively for PlayStation. This led to games being blocked from being released on other platforms entirely, PC included, with at best a

THE PC IS GOING TO BE AT THE CENTRE OF THE JAPANESE GAMING INDUSTRY

timed exclusive seeing the PC version release anywhere from six months to two years later.

This contributed to the decline and niche uptake of PC gaming in Japan through the 1990s and 2000s and, established big American publishers such as Electronic Arts, Sierra and

Lucasfilm Games aside, who kept releasing on PC as a priority, led to a market where new studios like Rockstar Games (founded in 1998), focused on console first and PC, if at all, second.

EXCLUSIVES ARE DEAD

Fast forward to now though, and it is clear that a shift in the gaming industry that started back in the early 2010s has come to pass – the old gaming industry model of exclusives is dead. The causes? Numerous, but the key ones are that the price of making games has increased astronomically (the production of *Tekken 8*, for example, cost three times more than *Tekken 7*'s cost), and also Microsoft (smartly foreseeing the future back in the early 2010s), started to embed console architecture in cloud gaming technology.

So while console exclusives have been drying up, and the console hardware to play them getting more and more expensive, the PC gaming platform, which is now receiving almost all major new games day one (aided by subscription services such as Xbox Game Pass) has kept growing in double figures, and shareholders of the big software companies (but especially the Japanese ones previously devoted to consoles only, such as Square, Capcom and Konami, to name a few) have seen this, and decided to abandon Sony's exclusivity policy to improve their financial earnings. The result? Big games from Japanese firms are releasing their IPs for PC on day one, and they're also ensuring that the PC version is the full-fat edition, too, as they know that's what PC gamers want. You'll notice that the quality of those day-one releases, in terms of bugs, has also massively improved.

That's because the PC is going to be at the centre of the Japanese gaming industry for the foreseeable future, which is why PC Gamer is starting this new regular column, reporting directly on the latest news, events and releases from Japan, with interviews directly from inside Japanese studios and from industry events. ■

JAPANESE PC GAMING PICKS

Cool new merch and events to check out now



HORI FORCE FEEDBACK TRUCK CONTROL SYSTEM

shorturl.at/Hi9pO

Hori's new PC truck driver simulation kit is truly next-level. It includes a full-size, dual-motor, force-feedback 40cm steering wheel with a seven-speed, 34-button gear shifter and magnetic sensor metal pedals.



MSI MPG GUNGIR 300 MONSTER HUNTER EDITION

shorturl.at/JhLSW

Capcom and MSI have joined forces to celebrate the famous monster hunting series' 20th anniversary with limited-edition PC systems and components, such as the MPG Gungir 300 PC tower.



TOKYO GAME SHOW 2024 IS INCOMING

shorturl.at/IQ5Bd

The world's biggest gaming show is back at Tokyo's Makuhari Messe, with TGS 2024 opening to the public on 28-29 September from 10am until 4pm. Entry tickets are each priced at ¥2,300, which is around £11/\$15.

PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 11, 2025

DEVELOPER

Firaxis

PUBLISHER

2K Games

LINK

civilization.2k.comSID MEIER'S
CIVILIZATION VII

Big changes are coming to the 30-year-old grand strategy series

Be honest: when you play *Civilization*, do you get bored sometime around the Renaissance and start over? If you're the dutiful type, you're in the minority: Firaxis has been collecting statistics, and although unable to share specifics, the dev told me it was "surprised" to discover how few *Civilization* players had ever finished a game of *Civilization*.

Firaxis has substantially changed *Civilization*'s structure for the next game. In *Civilization VII*, you no longer begin in the Ancient era, advancing through and beyond the Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Industrial and Modern eras. There are just three ages in *Civ VII* – Antiquity, Discovery and Modern – and the tech tree is simpler.

This might turn out to be the most controversial change since *Civilization V* ditched unit stacking, or since *Civilization VI* adopted a cartoonier art style (which has been abandoned for *Civ VII*). But before the word 'simplified' causes too much anxiety, I should elaborate: I think the changes are exciting, and Firaxis has also added, tweaked and expanded. You can now build towns, not just cities. There are powerful new units called Commanders. You'll find navigable rivers for the first time, so you can have your very own Mississippi or Nile. Features from the *Civ V* and *VI* expansion packs are here, including natural disasters.

It's still *Civilization*, a judgment I arrived at after playing for three hours, and which creative director Ed Beach expresses in

numbers. "We're very mindful of exactly how much we were changing," Beach said to a group of press, including myself, who were flown to Firaxis' office in early August to try the game. "You've probably heard the Firaxis mantra that 33% of the game stays the same, 33% of it gets updated, and 33% is brand new. We absolutely followed that again."

LAYER CAKE

Here's one big change: despite leading Rome, I played as Egyptian pharaoh Hatshepsut. Your leader no longer has to match your civilisation.

This relates to a key part of the new three-act structure: in the transition to a new age, you'll select a new civilisation. Each age has unique civs, and the choices available depend on your leader, but also what you've accomplished so far. If you've amassed a stable of powerful cavalry units, for instance, you might be granted the option of swapping to Mongolia for the Exploration Age.

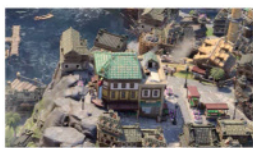
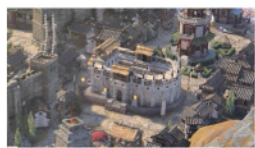
Beach's big theme for *Civilization VII* is the idea that "history is built in layers". The thought was inspired by the city of London, which began as Roman outpost Londinium before being abandoned, occupied by the conquering Normans, and then transformed by the Industrial Revolution. "Now we have a new version of *Civilization* where I can play a single pathway through history, and I get to be the Romans, I get to be the Normans, and then I get to be Britain," he said.

In the transition to a new era, old buildings lose their special effects and adjacency bonuses, so you'll be encouraged to build in layers, replacing the old with the new. The pre-defined districts of *Civ VI* have been dropped in favour of districts that the player defines by the buildings they opt to place in them.

Along with sub-goals that break up the journey toward one of *Civ*'s victory conditions, getting to adopt a new culture's architecture, units and bonuses along the way – an idea you'll also find in 2021 strategy game *Humankind* – might just tempt me to finally start sticking things out to the end. It's hard to say because *Civ VI*'s early game remains as compelling as ever, and the changes in *Civ VII* make it even more exciting.

PLAYED
IT

IN THE TRANSITION TO A NEW AGE, YOU'LL HAVE THE OPTION TO SELECT A NEW CIV

Civilization VII

➤ SETTLING IN

One of those changes has to do with how cities come to be in the first place. Settler units now found towns instead of cities, which are a much more sensible thing to found, I think. Don't get ahead of yourself!

Towns are like cities, but have no production queue. Instead, their productive capacity is converted directly into gold for your coffers. You can add buildings to towns, but only by purchasing them. You can spend gold to transform a town into a proper city, but you don't have to. You can leave your town as a town, and optionally select a permanent specialisation, turning it into a mining town, a farming town (which includes a fishing bonus), a trading outpost, or a military fort. Strategic *Civ* players already specialise their cities; now there's a built-in way to optimise your settlements based on their geographic and political situation.

I like this change a lot, not because I care about min-maxing, but because my love of expansion conflicts with my desire to actually manage 12 cities. In *Civ*'s blissful early game, when I'm making my most creative and consequential decisions, I enjoy sticking cities wherever I think cities should go, sometimes for purely aesthetic reasons. If I see a cute bay with fish, you better believe I'm hitting it with a cute bay-side fishing town. But now it can actually be a fishing town. In my play session, I founded several towns but kept my capital as my only city.

My overall impression of *Civ VII* is that Firaxis has sought to remove low-impact decisions – stuff players always do, or choices they don't take seriously – while emphasising actually important decisions.

A good example of this trend is the removal of Workers. RIP to the little guys you previously had to send hiking across the countryside to build land improvements like farms and mines. Improvements are now constructed automatically when a new land tile is annexed by a city. However, cities no longer expand into new tiles automatically. You're instead prompted to choose a new tile whenever a city grows. With that new level of control, I developed my capital, Rome, as a very long city, capturing resources on the either side of a river.

YOU CAN TRANSFORM A TOWN INTO A PROPER CITY, BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO

Influence can be spent to cooperate with or sabotage other nations. It's an all-purpose diplomacy currency, basically, and might be too universal. I could spend it to accept a neighbouring country's proposal for an international farmer's market, and also to sanction them or attempt to infiltrate their army.

The system did get me more involved in international relations than I usually am early in a *Civ* game: I used Influence to befriend an independent power, to make military pacts that increased my unit strength, and to weaken my antagonistic neighbour, Egypt – which by the way was run by Roman emperor Octavian, who traded places with Hatshepsut.

AT WAR

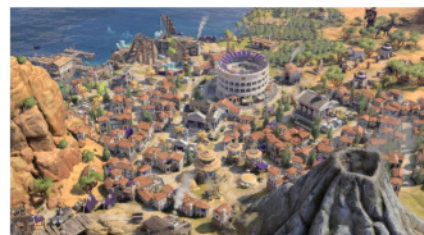
The AI leaders still behave like kids who are making things up as they go, leaping from negotiations over fruits and vegetables to declarations of war, but I'm not sure more human-like computer players would be a profitable area for Firaxis to invest in.

I concluded my session in the middle of a protracted war between Egyptian Rome and Roman Egypt that I refused to end – mainly out of spite, but also because I wanted to play with the new Commander units. They are now the only units that get promotions, which buff their abilities or the abilities of units around them. Commanders can also issue orders to nearby units, telling them to focus fire on a particular enemy, for instance, which confers bonuses. There's a whiff of *XCOM* here: I can imagine getting quite attached to a max-level general who's overseen my greatest military victories.

As curious as I am about big additions like Commanders and the new three-age structure, I walked away most excited by little tweaks to ancient *Civ* conventions, like the addition of towns. Even smaller, but also exciting: when you tell a unit to fortify, it actually builds a fortification, and Scouts can now put up little watchtowers to see further – I love that.

In three hours, I clocked many more changes than I can fit in this article, or that I even fully understood. (Commanders can somehow call in reinforcements, for example, but I never got it to work.) That's a relief, because what's the point of a new *Civ* game if it doesn't feel new? A sequel ought to make us reevaluate all the previous games, and I think *Civ VII* will do that. Brace yourself for all of the extensive Reddit debates.

Tyler Wilde



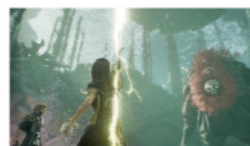


ABOVE: Settler units now found towns not cities. You add buildings to towns by purchasing them.

LEFT: The neighbouring civilisation loved console gaming. War was inevitable.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Sandfall InteractivePUBLISHER
Kepler InteractiveLINK
shorturl.at/aWW2jCLAIR OBSCUR:
EXPEDITION 33The Belle Époque meets
dark fantasy in this new RPG

As I watch three of the operatives of Expedition 33, Gustav, Lune and Maelle, face off in turn-based combat against a monstrously big and bulging abomination, a nightmarish version of an Edwardian-era child's toy hellbent on our destruction, all I can think of is, boy, this game reminds me of *Persona* in all the best ways.

Everything from the camera angles positioned behind our team of operatives to the turn-based combat system, through the weird, unsettling designs of the enemies, and onto the strike first or be struck advantage system when entering a battle, as well as, even, the supremely slick menu animations and transitions. It all creates a gut reaction in me that *Clair Obscur* owes plenty to Atlas' long-running series. But, as I proceed to learn quickly during my time being given a lengthy hands-off gameplay demo by the game's creative director, Guillaume Broche, as well as producer, François Meurisse, *Clair Obscur* is excitingly far, far more than a mere *Persona* imitator.

LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

But I have to ask Broche about *Persona*, so I do. "Yeah. We are definitely not hiding that there are influences from the big Japanese genre," he notes candidly. "Actually, I wouldn't say that *Persona* is the biggest influence on what we do [though]. I don't hide my love of the *Final Fantasy VIII*, *IX*, and *X* era. [But] on the

Persona side, yeah, we definitely took a look at what they were doing in terms of the camera movements, and the menus, and how everything has been created dynamically, and trying to do something that really feels dynamic, but is also more like our own thing, in a way."

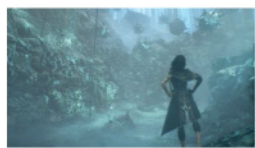
And I think it is fair to say that anyone who takes even one look at *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* would see that Sandfall Interactive is doing its own thing. As while the core gameplay may be influenced by *Final Fantasy* and *Persona*, the art style is very much not, with a gloriously realised Belle Époque styling knitted together seamlessly with a rich dark fantasy aesthetic. The look of *Clair Obscur* is dark, punchy and distinctive, but how did the devs land on that?

"When we were trying to find our own direction, we thought, 'OK, we want something really unique and that stands out. What has not been explored?' We looked at different eras of history, and we looked at Belle Époque France. And we were like, 'I don't think it's been really explored that much'. And if we combine it with high fantasy, that creates a unique mix that we think hasn't been done before at all. And, also, something we particularly looked at is the surrealism movement."

This nod to surrealism is something that I quickly picked up on. In one of the levels I was shown, the Expedition 33 team was progressing through what at first looked like an underwater environment. Look up and you saw the underside of a sea and ships, as well as the distortion of light created as it passed through a body of water, but as our operatives moved through the environment, you found that you're not swimming at all, but walking and running on dry, hard ground. There was a trippy impossibility to the environment, and that's before you'd even factored in its dark fantasy aesthetic, which looked stunning, rendered in Unreal Engine 5. The detail and lighting, on the characters and the hub-based world environments around them, were gorgeous.

"The production actually started six years ago," clarifies Broche when I ask him about the use of Unreal Engine 5, "on Unreal Engine 4, and we've upgraded with every version that came out, and right

"IF WE COMBINE BELLE ÉPOQUE FRANCE WITH HIGH FANTASY, THAT CREATES A UNIQUE MIX"

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

✕ now we are on Unreal Engine 5. We are big fans of Unreal Engine because we are a very small team compared to the game we are making. We are a team of about 30 people. We really think we are betting a lot on new technology to be able to achieve that, and I truly believe that five or six years ago it would have been impossible for a team of our size to make this. But now the ecosystem of tech that exists, like Unreal Engine 5, saves us a lot of time on everything, like animation, rendering, and everything. For us, it's a key foundation for the studio to really look for the latest technology."

PAINT A PICTURE

As beautiful as *Clair Obscur's* visuals are, though, as Broche transitions our gameplay demo forward in time to later stages of the game, showing off a variety of environments from forests to caves to wild plains, each fractured in some way by the game's surreal art styling, I find the thing that really grabs my attention with *Clair Obscur* is its narrative, which sounds brilliantly bonkers.

Clair Obscur's narrative is based around the city of Lumière, where once a year a mysterious and seemingly all-powerful being called the Paintress wakes up and approaches a large monolith structure in the centre of the city. She paints upon it a cursed number, which is constantly dropping down numerically. And, as soon as the Paintress paints that number, everyone of that age turns to smoke and fades away.

As such, the age to which people can live is constantly falling, and as a result of this each year an expedition from the city is tasked with venturing forth into the unknown to try and find the Paintress and destroy her, thereby ending her annual culling of the population. However, none of these expeditions have been successful up until this point, leading to the operatives of Expedition 33, the upcoming number that will be painted upon the monolith, heading off on their mission. As such, Expedition 33's members find themselves on a race against time to find and end the Paintress.

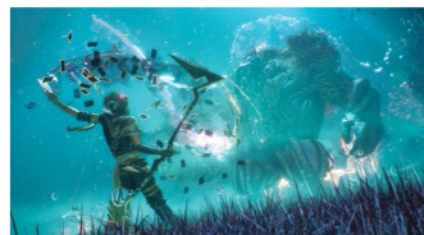
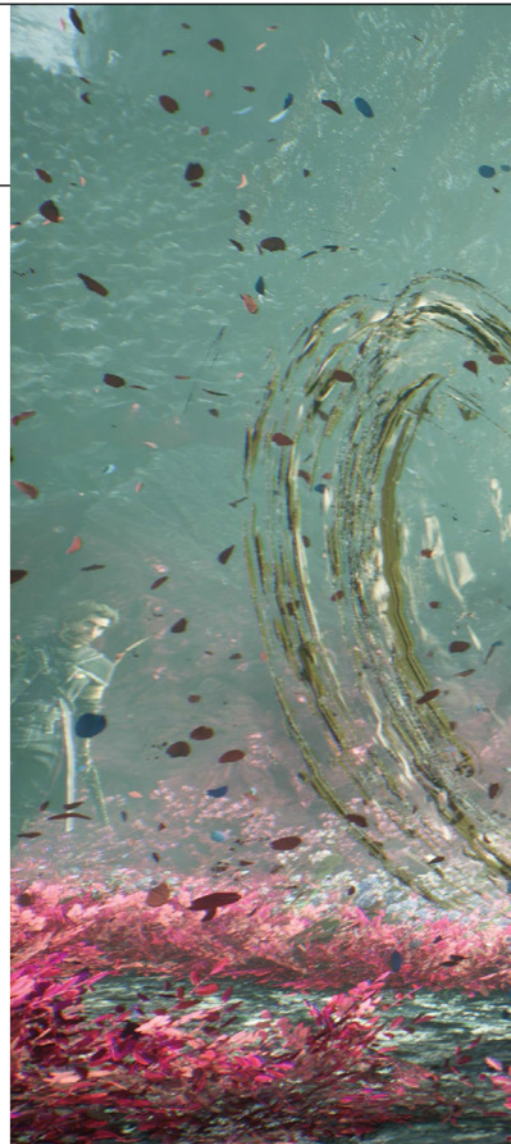
Yep, it's certainly a distinctive setup for a narrative, bringing to mind the plot from

classic sci-fi movie *Logan's Run*, and one that feels tonally consistent with the 'end of days' vibe that is pervasive in both *Persona* and plenty of *Final Fantasy* games, too. Where did this crazy narrative come from, though?

"I love this question," Broche replies, "because I don't think there is a particular thing where it came from one morning, like, 'Oh, why don't I do that?' Basically, I love stories where you go and venture into the unknown, and you really have to go with this kind of fear, and you have no idea what this goal exactly is, and you have no idea what is in between you and this goal. You just go, and hope for the best. [These are] really the kind of stories that I like. It's with a group dynamic. They go with a very clear goal, but nothing is clear, except the goal. And at the end of the goal, you're like, 'I don't really know what I'm supposed to do, or where I'm supposed to go. I think this sense of discovery is really something that we wanted to bring here.'"

Something that I picked up on from the in-game cutscenes I saw, as well as from the game's recently released unveiling trailer, was that this sense of discovery is partnered with a melancholic overall tone, with a mostly sombre classical music soundtrack punctured here and there by more upbeat rock tracks, such as when Expedition 33 are in combat. The world these characters live in in *Clair Obscur* is a dark, grim one, and the challenge this team of operatives faces is daunting. They have no idea how to reach the Paintress, and even if they can possibly defeat their archenemy if they do. It's a dark game visually and audibly, and with a dark narrative, too, so why all the melancholy?

"So I think the tone of the main story is definitely melancholic," confirmed Broche. "I think it's a very good word. It's a story with a lot of very heavy themes. As you say, the world they live in is kind of grey, and they're not very happy, with people dying everywhere. So for us, the core of the story, yeah, is very melancholic, but also we didn't want to exclude more light-hearted moments. I think you're also maybe more attached to characters when you see them having fun. We wanted the characters to be very human and normal – like people you could appreciate and know. I don't think anyone can be dark for one year straight! At one point, you have to let go, a little bit. So there's these funny and more humorous moments [in the game]. But the core of the game is more melancholic and dark, with some little humorous highlights here and there."



There is a trippy surreality to the environments.

THEY FIND THEMSELVES ON A RACE AGAINST TIME TO FIND AND END THE PAINTRESS



ABOVE: Each character has a unique perks tree.

LEFT: The turn-based menu system will be familiar to JRPG fans.

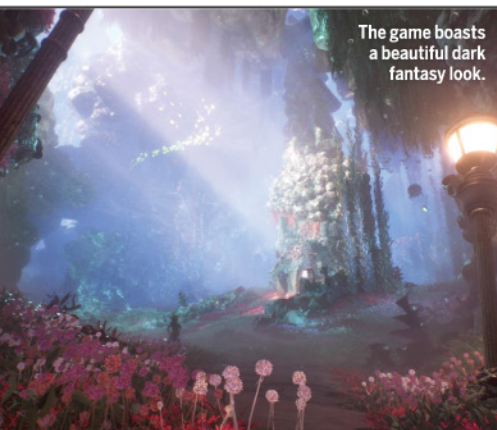
PREVIEW

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

RIGHT: Well-timed button presses can optimise attacks.

BELOW: While there are various members of Expedition 33, only three can be active at any one time.





The game boasts a beautiful dark fantasy look.



TURN-BASED, EVOLVED

Discovery and trying new things is something that feels right at the forefront of *Clair Obscur's* combat system, too, which I soon see unroll before me in terms of its impressive depth and, excitingly for a turn-based RPG, neat use of real-time action button-presses within turn-based actions. So, for example, while in a turn-based *Final Fantasy* or *Persona*, when you select an option, be that an attack, block or dodge, you as the player then simply watch the outcome of that, with the animation played and the game determining whether or not that action is a success or failure. In *Clair Obscur*, though, while you do select the option you want your team member to perform in the exact same turn-based environment it is being executed in, the game offers up button-timing windows that let you optimise your selected action.

This is most obvious at first in player attacks, with Broche timing controller button-presses perfectly to enhance the damage done. However, thanks to the game's AP (action points) system, which is the currency you need to pull off each character's special attacks, and AP being rewarded for perfectly parrying or dodging enemy attacks, it soon becomes apparent that the highest level play in this game will be mastering the timings, protecting your characters and then turning the tide on your foe.

One boss character, for example, tried to flatten Expedition 33 team leader Gustav by crushing him with its giant torso, but by timing dodges just right, Broche could not only prevent Gustav from being hit, but also earn more AP back. Equally, Broche showed off that if you can time your button-presses to successfully parry an enemy combo, then you unlock the ability for the team to launch a deadly counter attack on them. It's a neat system, delivering the chill, turn-based flavour of a traditional RPG, but then adding in points of enhanced engagement and, hopefully, fun for the player. Naturally, I ask the pair why they decided to introduce these real-time elements to a turn-based game.

"I think it was about really speeding it up in general," opens Broche, "but what

we really wanted to do is that once you've mastered the game, and if you want it to be fast-based, you can. So you have both options. [That's why the game's] menus are like this. What we wanted to do is, for players who also like action games and very creative things, [to] have a high response to input when stuff happens. And, [if you want], you can go very, very fast. I think it works in correlation with *Clair Obscur's* defence system, also, which is very reactive. But we also didn't want to leave behind the players who like the more strategic aspect of the turn-based gameplay, and who just want to take their time. So it's really a mix. It's allowing both, basically. You can either take your time or go super-fast."

"For example," Meurisse adds, "I'm more about the strategic side. What I love about the game is that when you start to play, you're really in an RPG. [But] I like the opportunity of dodging or parrying stuff. It makes it more fun or more exciting. And even without being as strong as some players at parrying and dodging – when you get one, it's really, really rewarding."

What also looks like it is potentially going to be very rewarding for the player is *Clair Obscur's* deep customisation options for character builds, with each receiving their own unique perks tree, as well as a multi-layered system of assigning special buffs/traits to characters that work as passives. Many of these buffs can be levelled up, too, transforming them. This combination means that there looks to be plenty of customisation available.

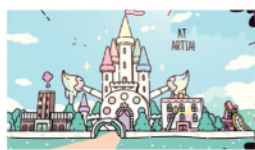
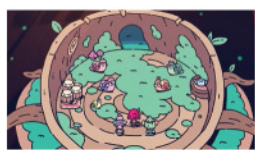
DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

Overall, then, I've come away from my time watching *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* intrigued to say the least. Like the game's creative director, Broche, I'm a huge fan of turn-based RPGs, and especially *Persona* and *Final Fantasy*. So the idea of a dark western fantasy take on that genre, but with some really smart evolutions to the format, really appeals to me. Without going hands-on with the game at length it's hard to get a true feel for the final experience it's going to offer, but watching Broche play the game up close, and seeing its grim but gripping plot unfold, I've got a suspicion that this is going to be one of 2025's most exciting new games, and a game that I'm likely going to spend far too much time engrossed in. A dark fantasy Belle Époque JRPG made in Unreal Engine 5 and boasting some smart genre evolutions? Yes please!

Robert Jones

MANY OF THESE BUFFS CAN BE LEVELLED UP, TOO, TRANSFORMING THEM

The Plucky Squire



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024DEVELOPER
All Possible FuturesPUBLISHER
Devolver DigitalLINK
thepluckysquire.com

THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

How many games let you make friends with a MtG card?

I think if I discovered that my entire life was just a story in a children's picture book, I'd probably have quite a serious breakdown. Jot, the eponymous hero of *The Plucky Squire*, seems unfazed by it all, however – even as he leaps from the pages of his book and discovers an entirely new 3D reality beyond his own.

It's a great twist for a game that at first just seems like a cute little adventure in the style of the old top-down *Legend of Zelda* games. Initially charged just with finding some beeswax for a wizard, Jot merrily journeys through the pages of his book with his friends, all brought to life with gorgeous 2D animations. But when the evil sorcerer Humgrump unmoors him from the constraints of the story, things get more interesting.

My hands-on only features the first four chapters of the game, but I'm impressed how much creativity developer All Possible Futures has crammed into that roughly two-hour introduction. As my party and I continue to travel the land – now searching for a way to stop Humgrump – my fourth-wall-breaking abilities let me overcome traditional obstacles in fun new ways.

Jot can now monkey about with the very sentences of his story, for example, swapping a word from one line to another. Changing a word will change whatever it describes, making a 'big' enemy 'small', turning 'night' to 'day', or making a 'locked' door suddenly 'open'. There's not as much

PLAYED
IT

room to experiment as I'd like – only certain words are allowed in each sentence – and the puzzles are more charming than they are brain-teasing, but I'm hopeful more depth may develop as the game goes on from here.

You can also, as I mentioned before, simply jump out of the book entirely, either running over to another portal to jump back in at a different point, or exploring the cluttered and oddly sprawling desk the book rests on to find new abilities. Thanks to your powers, you're free to jump in and out of any artwork you find out there, flitting between 2D and 3D to get across gaps and avoid patrolling beetles.

FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC

My favourite moment in the preview build comes when I discover an abandoned game card – think *Magic: The Gathering* – depicting a classic fantasy elven archer. Leaping in, I'm able to battle with and then befriend her. She likes me enough to lend me her bow, which I can take with me back into my own story and use for a shooting minigame against swarms of flying insects. It makes me really excited to see what further surprises are in store deeper into this adventure. Does Jot ever get to explore a comic book, or perhaps the art on the front of a videogame case?

But even within the confines of the original book, there's such a sense of imagination to *The Plucky Squire*. Minigames like that bow-based encounter abound – within four chapters I've boxed a honey badger *Punch Out*-style, done *Mario*-style 2D platforming, had to time my grab perfectly to snatch a fish out of mid air, and more. None of these diversions has great depth or strategy to it, but that's not really the point – the joy is just in seeing what fun little scene has been prepared for you next, and how it'll be rendered in the game's adorable art.

The combination of gentle charm with real creativity elevates *The Plucky Squire* into something more interesting than just another cosy little adventure. If it can maintain that sense of novelty and fun in the chapters that follow – and maybe get a little more elaborate with its puzzles – it could be 2024's next great success story.

Robin Valentine



MY FOURTH-WALL-BREAKING ABILITIES LET ME OVERCOME TRADITIONAL OBSTACLES



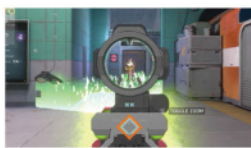
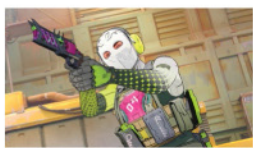
ABOVE: The 'real' world is a maze of discarded toys and craft supplies on a young boy's desk.



LEFT: The game effortlessly switches perspectives, jumping between top-down, 2D and 3D adventure.

PREVIEW

Spectre Divide



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Mountaintop Studios

PUBLISHER
Mountaintop Studios

LINK
playspectre.com

SPECTRE DIVIDE

3v3 Counter-Strike for the aim-down-sights generation

Do you ever wonder why there aren't more tactical shooters like *Counter-Strike*? Valve's round-based, economy-driven competitive FPS stood largely unchallenged in a subgenre it created for 20 years before *Valorant* arrived on the scene, painting over *CS:GO*'s grounded arsenal with a roster of Riot-style heroes and playmaking ultimate moves.

Valorant was exciting proof that there's more to be done with the *CS* formula, and more than enough player interest to support two tac-shooter giants. *Spectre Divide* wants to be the third. After playing a few matches, I think it has a decent shot.

I know, I'm still on the fence about that name too, but I'll keep saying it out loud until it sounds normal. *Spectre Divide* is the debut game from Mountaintop Studios, an independent startup with an 80-person team boasting veteran talent from Respawn, Riot, Bungie, Blizzard and Valve.

I went into a *Spectre* preview session last week anticipating I wouldn't have much to say. Despite a brief love affair with *Valorant* at launch and 70-ish hours of *CS:GO*, I've never managed to embrace their strict stop-and-pop gameplay. *Spectre* has a buy menu, econ rounds, bomb sites, Shift walking, knife running, and a one-shot-kill sniper rifle just like you'd expect, but its shooting is more accessible with bullets that always go where you're aiming. That alone is a huge change to how these games are traditionally played, but it's actually one of two tweaks to *CS/*

FIRST
LOOK

Valorant that Mountaintop considers "core pillars" of *Spectre*.

Teams are 3v3, but everyone controls two bodies: literally. You spawn in your first body and can switch to your second body at any time, wherever they are on the map. Mountaintop calls the mechanic Duality, and your clone is your Spectre. If you're a Phoenix main in *Valorant*, this is Run it Back: The Game.

ADS is king: *Spectre* is an aim-down-sights dominant FPS. Recoil patterns can be learned and mastered, but your dot sight will always represent where bullets are travelling (think *Rainbow Six Siege*).

The whole Duality thing is as strange as it sounds. You can body-swap at any time, but you can also toss a puck to move your other body to a new location. Mountaintop showed us an overview trailer that explained how the Spectre is meant to be used: you can watch two angles at once, cover your own flank, or use one body to make a distraction.

According to game director Lee Horn, who worked on *Apex Legends* and *Valorant*, the Duality mechanic was created to solve a problem created by its 3v3 format. "What happens is, when you have one defender on each site, imagine three attackers rushing that defender, eliminating them – the space is kind of solved. We have the site, take it over. That game is still fun, but it's not 10,000 hours fun." Then one night, the idea hit him, "What if I could be in two spots at once?"

With two bodies "attackers can't just rush any more" and Mountaintop can still preserve the tight-knit qualities of 3v3. As an added bonus, players spend a lot more time actually playing.

PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

Still, Duality is confusing at first. Jumping headfirst into a map I've never seen with guns I've never used was enough to worry about without a second body to keep track of, but Horn, who was serving as team captain, gave me a simple tip: stash my second body somewhere safe, then don't worry about it until I need it. In that way, Duality can simply be used as a second chance at every round.

If I strolled into the site, forgot to check the right flank and got shot in the head, I was zipped to my backup body in less



TEAMS ARE 3V3, BUT EVERYONE CONTROLS TWO BODIES: LITERALLY



Spectre matches are around half the length of *Counter-Strike*, first to eight wins.

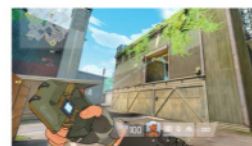
PREVIEW

Spectre Divide

RIGHT: *Spectre*'s powerful one-shot sniper rifle is called the Prototype-OP, or just OP for short.

BELOW: *Spectre* aims to have a more generous gun economy, but it's still smart to save when the bomb's going off.





than a second. If you've sunk 1,000 hours into one of these games and ever felt like you spent most of that time staring at a spectate screen, you can imagine how empowering it feels to make a mistake and get a chance to redeem yourself.

That more or less describes how my first *Spectre* match played out. We'd push, get a kill or two, die, then try to mount a comeback with our backups. By our second match, without anybody really acknowledging it, we started taking bigger risks with our Spectres – splitting our bodies between two sites, tossing pucks behind enemy lines, daring to swap bodies mid-firefight to repeek an angle.

I even did something I never felt confident enough to pull off in *Counter-Strike*: immediately peaking mid with a sniper rifle. In one high point of my demo, I peeked a corner, killed two but died, then used that information to watch that position from a longer angle with my Spectre and wipe the rest of the team with a heavy machine gun. Moments like that graduated Duality from 'maybe just a gimmick' to 'actually, this is pretty sweet'.

The highs helped soften some pretty spectacular blunders, too. Several times I tried to throw a smoke grenade but accidentally tossed my Spectre puck instead, offering up my backup life as an unholy sacrifice to the other team. At one point, our team was on a three-round winning streak and I tried to get fancy by body-swapping while I was planting the bomb, but I messed up the inputs and ended up lining up an easy double kill for the last enemy on the team. That's when I discovered another hidden benefit of 3v3: four fewer people watching your worst screw ups live in HD.

Body-swapping is Mountaintop's flashiest feature, but *Spectre*'s gunplay is its biggest break in tradition. Every *Spectre* gun has aim-down-sights, and with the exception of sniper rifles, you can move and shoot without losing accuracy.

It's hard to overstate how much of a difference this makes – learning to come to a complete stop in *Counter-Strike* before firing a shot is a skill unique to this specific type of game. Leaving it behind risks alienating tac-shooter lifers who've been shooting from the hip for 20 years,

but Mountaintop believes it'll also attract a new faction of FPS fans who've never jived with CS. "We're super excited about true-to-crosshair ADS unlocking tac shooters for a whole group of people for whom [*Counter-Strike*'s] shooting model is not the right thing for them," Horn says. "Hopefully we've given them that."

But Horn points out one aspect of *Spectre*'s guns that should feel familiar to the tac-shooter senior class is recoil patterns – they're deterministic, meaning they can be studied and mastered. There is some random spread when hipfiring, a tactic that Horn only recommends in very close-quarters scenarios. "At the end of the day, you're still mastering recoil patterns, but they're more immediately understandable. You don't have to go research the pattern, you just shoot the wall, watch your crosshair."

I might just be one of those potential converts. *Spectre*'s shooting was immediately comfortable and right to me in a way I've never felt in CS. Browsing the buy menu was like pacing the aisles of a sweet shop. I wanted to try everything, and I liked almost all of it. But I don't think traditional ADS will mean everyone can easily pop headshots like they do in *Rainbow Six Siege*. The recoil on SMGs and assault rifles is still a handful – I'm just better equipped to deal with it.

UTILITY

I'll draw a circle around one more major aspect of *Spectre*: sponsor kits. These are essentially classes that come with unique utility. I noticed a lot of *Valorant* in these kits – varieties of smoke grenades, vision-blocking walls, and proximity mines all stylised around a fictional corporate sponsor in the world of *Spectre* – but they're noticeably toned down. Utility isn't meant to be the star of the show. "There are no over-the-top ultimates to act as an insta-win button," Horn says in an overview video. "Skill reigns supreme."

But *Spectre*'s kits are still louder than *Counter-Strike*'s grounded utility belt. One class has a self-heal that replenishes both of your bodies at once, and also grants a speed boost to the user's Spectre. There's a scanning dart that's extremely close to Sova's recon arrow in *Valorant* and a smoke grenade that can automatically teleport your spectre wherever it lands.

I take it as a good sign when I'm several days removed from playing a multiplayer shooter and can't stop thinking about when I'll get to play it next.

Morgan Park

IT'LL ALSO ATTRACT A NEW FACTION OF FPS FANS WHO'VE NEVER JIVED WITH CS

PC GAMER

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MAKING

How
PLANET COASTER 2
is upgrading the theme
park sim genre like
never before.

By Robert Jones

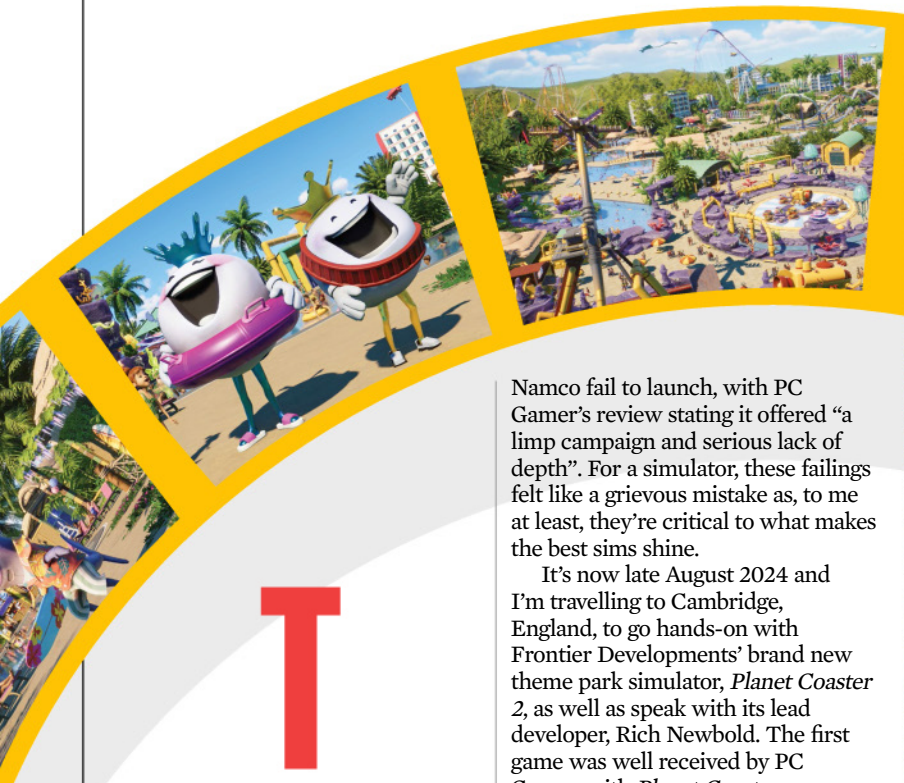


A SPLASH



COVER FEATURE

Planet Coaster 2



T

heme park simulators have long made their home on PC. From the now legendary *Theme Park*, created by Peter Molyneux back in 1994, to Frontier Developments' 2016 hit *Planet Coaster*, this genre taps into much of what makes PC gaming so great, letting gamers flex their creative and, yes, management skills in one of the most fun environments possible.

But making a good theme park simulator, as with any building sim, is not easy and, as history has shown us, there have been plenty of failures along the way. Only last year, for example, did *Park Beyond*, a new theme park sim published by Bandai

Namco fail to launch, with PC Gamer's review stating it offered "a limp campaign and serious lack of depth". For a simulator, these failings felt like a grievous mistake as, to me at least, they're critical to what makes the best sims shine.

It's now late August 2024 and I'm travelling to Cambridge, England, to go hands-on with Frontier Developments' brand new theme park simulator, *Planet Coaster 2*, as well as speak with its lead developer, Rich Newbold. The first game was well received by PC Gamer, with *Planet Coaster* very much acting as the spiritual successor to the *RollerCoaster Tycoon* series (Frontier Developments made *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3*). It also rapidly created a lively community of fans online, becoming the theme park sim of note. However, PC Gamer's review score of 75 percent pointed to a game that could offer even more. So, keen to learn how this sequel was building on the great original experience, I ask Newbold what the vision was with *Planet Coaster 2*.

"It was water parks," he replies candidly. "We really wanted to bring a sequel, and put water parks in it, and [for it to have] all the aspects of those water parks – building a swimming pool; building those water bodies; building flumes – as

BELOW: Water park creation is new in *Planet Coaster 2*, letting you design fab flumes, lazy rivers, cool pools and more.



well as the opportunity to add a lot more depth to the management from the original *Planet Coaster*, and adding a lot more levers for those park managers to eke out as much money from their guests as possible, and building a thriving, successful park, with happy guests spending their money.

"You continue to expand those parks that you're building, and building upon those systems. But also the creativity as well – taking the great creativity we had in the first game, and taking some of the community feedback where they wanted more creativity, and adding the ability to put scenery pieces directly onto rides and onto coaster cars, and having those move with those as well. As well as things like adding scaling to objects, which was a big community request as well.

"So *Planet Coaster 2* was predominantly taking those water parks, and putting them in the game, but building upon those amazing foundations we had with the first game."





THE CREATION AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS ON OFFER ARE **MIND-BLOWINGLY** IMPRESSIVE

TWIN PEAKS

I'll sample the new water park creation system shortly, but first Newbold is keen to get me hands-on with a couple of gameplay samples from *Planet Coaster 2*, giving me a flavour of both its core gameplay and for the multitude of ways that Frontier has built on and expanded

the creation and management experience. After a quick introduction, I'm dropped in a PC Gamer-exclusive campaign scenario called, amusingly, 'Summit Awesome', that tasks me with building-up a park on a very interesting piece of land. The level's narrative is that Hank Brogan, acquisition intern at Coaster

ABOVE: You can ride your own coasters in first-person from any position, from front to back carriage.

Coast (the fictitious firm you're hired to work for in the game), has scored a 2-for-1 deal on a new park purchase, but there's a catch he wasn't aware of – part of the land sits on the opposite mountain-top, divided by a ravine. As such, I'll have to both build up the park but, also, I'm tasked with 'bridging the gap' across the two peaks by constructing a monorail.

To complete a campaign level you need to acquire a certain number of medals, which are tied to successfully meeting criteria, such as 'Create three flat rides', or 'Build a rollercoaster with a 40-metre drop'. Dutifully I get to work, selecting from the game's menu of pre-built flat rides and placing them on some free terrain on the one peak I currently have access to, successfully linking them up to my park's concourses, testing them (all rides need to be tested before opening), and then opening them to the paying public. Each ride, and there are many, come in a wide selection of themes, but can also be built or designed from scratch, and this is where *Planet Coaster 2* has

A HAIR-RAISING HERITAGE

Landmark theme park sims that changed the game on PC



THEME PARK (1994)

The legendary game that not only popularised the genre of theme park simulators on PC, but also cemented Peter Molyneux as an early industry star. The box art is iconic.



ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON (1999)

Coming half a decade after *Theme Park*, Chris Sawyer's take on the genre built on everything Molyneux had left, creating a sim that offered, for the time, unmatched management options.



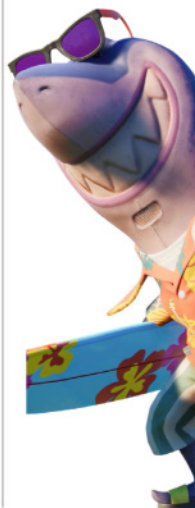
ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON 3 (2004)

RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 was notable for many top additions to the genre, including a custom sandbox mode, fully 3D world, first-person ride mode and incredible creation options.



PLANET COASTER (2016)

The acclaimed spiritual successor to *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3*, *Planet Coaster* resurrected the genre after ten years in the wilderness, selling millions of copies on PC.



DESIGN

Designing a new water park ride is a multi-stage process. First land must be bought or cleared. Then gamers can either place pre-built rides, of which there are many, or design their own take on it in the ride editor. It then must be tested before opening to the public.

SPLASH DOWN

Planet Coaster 2's new water parks up close

FACILITIES

As you would expect from a water park, it's no good having amazing pools, flumes and water rides if visitors have nowhere to change into their swimming gear, so changing rooms are essential. Guests also appreciate shops to buy inflatables, food and souvenirs.

PRESTIGE

Any water ride, as with theme park rides, is judged by visitors on a number of factors, from the queue length to surrounding scenery and decoration, through to its cleanliness and how thrilling it is, among other factors. Park entrance fee is also a factor.

CUSTOMISATION

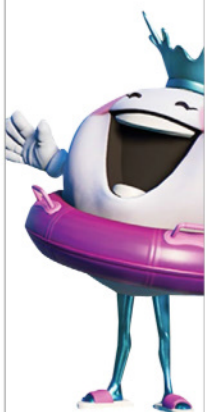
Just like coasters, water rides can be built piece by piece, and then customised as desired. For example, flumes can have open, closed, banked and transparent pipes, be painted in hundreds of colours, and then decorated with thousands of scenery pieces.



FRANCHISE MODE LETS YOU COMPETE WITH GAMERS ONLINE TO SEE WHOSE PARK IS BEST

markedly expanded upon what's possible in the first game. There are now over 3,000 scenery pieces that can be used to decorate a ride or its environs, as well as a huge selection of patterns, too. The result is that, entering the ride builder to start from scratch and create my own ride, I'm offered a simply astonishing amount of customisation. And each component of every ride can be tailored individually, too. So if you want the support beams for your tea cups ride to be blue and covered with seashells, while then having the tea cups themselves finished with a red polka-dot pattern and adorned with miniature trees (yes, anything goes!), then so be it. This is possible because not only does *Planet Coaster 2* work on a 'piece by piece' mantra, where everything placeable is its own separate piece, but now there's object scaling on offer, too. This means you can increase the size or decrease the size of any object. Want a giant puffer fish decoration to adorn the wall of your nautical-themed rollercoaster? Well, now you can in *Planet Coaster*

BELOW: Queen Splash, one of *Planet Coaster 2*'s loveable mascots.



2. Before I can open the third flat ride, though, I face a snag. I don't have energy to power it, and this neatly introduces me to both power zones and, in another expansion of the first game's offering, individual staff zones. As in the real world, theme park rides not only need power, but mechanics to keep them

working correctly. And, while there's high-level automation to all staff in your park, if you want you can really get into the weeds in the game's staff menu to tailor every part of their role, from creating custom areas of operation (for example, getting your mascot King Coaster to entertain only in a specific public plaza) to

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Top world-building sims to play on PC today



MANOR LORDS

Build your own medieval settlement from the ground up, while also ensuring your settlers don't starve or are killed by bandits or rival lords. Amazingly deep sim considering its tiny development team.



ANNO 1800

An expansive city builder set through the age of the Industrial Revolution. Choose how to embrace the new world and its technological marvels, while being politically savvy.



CITIES SKYLINES

The heir to the now legendary *SimCity*, this deep and content-rich city building sim, as well as its recently released sequel, allow you to build the metropolises of your dreams.



TROPICO 6

The long-running series' latest game tasks you once more with stepping into the shoes of El Presidente and ruling a banana republic through four different eras. Lots of sim fun in the sun.



most impressive and powerful creation system any theme park sim has ever seen. Not only is there a huge menu of pre-built coasters to choose from, but if you start from scratch there's an almost dizzying amount of options to play with, from track pieces to decorations to smart automations. For example, after using the game's bulldozer to clear more land on one of my park's peaks, I crack on trying to build that coaster with the 40-metre drop. And everything is going well, I've got the chain-lift ascent, a lovely banked first corner into the drop, a loop the loop ring and great views over the gorge. But I then find I've not got much space and am unsure how to get the track to connect back up with the docking station. In *Planet Coaster 2*, though, I don't have to worry, as in something that felt like pure magic, I can simply click a single button and have the game automatically complete the ride for me, determining an optimal route back to the docking station. Yes, sure, you then still need to tailor things like breaking zones yourself, but having this ability on tap is fantastic, letting you focus on the creative fun side of coaster design, and then outsourcing, when needed, the more prosaic finishing touches. You can go from installing loop the loops to adding decorative elements really quickly.

H2-WOAH!

Having sampled the traditional theme park experience the game offers in campaign mode (there's three different game modes on offer in *Planet Coaster 2*, campaign, sandbox and franchise, the latter letting you compete with gamers online to see whose park is best), Newbold loads up another campaign mission that will see me building my very first water park, while also explaining the nitty gritty of just what's possible.

"So [with] *Planet Coaster 2*'s pool building tools we have the ability to build stamped areas of pools. We have the ability to draw freeform kidney bean-type shapes. You can build those water bodies. You can build the flumes. We have different types of flumes – so, like, body flumes, energy flumes, raft flumes, slides, lazy rivers. You can build those for your guests to enjoy. [So], it's making sure those are in place, but also making sure the infrastructure is in place as well, such as changing rooms, and making sure that you've got facilities in place for them to change into, and making sure you've got shops for them to buy inflatables

determining which time of day they take their break, or how much they're getting paid, then you can. Newbold adds that, "We've been working on the staff system [in *Planet Coaster 2*] to ensure that they have that decision-making of when they want to have their breaks, and making sure that their morale is happy as well. So you have to balance making sure that you're paying them enough money so that they stay happy, or that they're having enough breaks during the day as well. So if you really don't want your vendors to have any breaks because you want to leave that shop open, or you don't want to hire that cover – you can do that. You can get rid of that break. But you're going to run the risk that that member of staff is going to be unhappy, and they might quit on you." Staffed up and powered up, I complete the three flat rides, earn my medal, and then move on to building my own rollercoaster.

BELOW: Now all rides can be heavily customised with thousands of colours, patterns, and decorative objects.



THRILL SEEKER

I think it fair to say the rollercoaster builder in *Planet Coaster 2* is the

DEVELOPER DIARY

KING COASTER

Speaking with game director Rich Newbold

To get the inside story as to how Frontier Developments has approached building the second *Planet Coaster* game, PC Gamer travelled to Cambridge, England, to speak with its lead dev, Rich Newbold.

What was the first theme park management game you played?

For me, it was *Theme Park*. Mentally, now, that blue cover art has just ingrained itself in my head. For me, the memory that really sticks was the ability to adjust values, [such as] how much sugar something would have, and how much salt something would have, and to have that matter to the guests that were visiting that park. And having that memory of being like, "This is a lot of detail. I get to adjust the micro-detail of what this theme park is selling my guest". That's something that's really resonated with me through the different management games that I've been making as a game developer, and providing that feeling to players of: "There's depth here. There's something I can really eke out."

Why did Frontier Developments get into creating theme park simulators in the first place?

Planet Coaster was a great opportunity for us to lean into a lot of experience we had at Frontier. We [had] worked on *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* originally, and there

was a lot of experience and knowledge [from] working on those games. It was an opportunity for us to create our own theme park game, and our own version of that game, and to bring it forward to 2016, and to bring a modern version – and really explore the potential of the management... the new aspects of management on *Planet Coaster*. And the creativity as well. On the original *Planet Coaster*, you're adding piece by piece to the building, and adding the scenery building, and allowing players in the community to build these wonderful theme parks, and taking the pieces of the different themes that we have and putting them together and seeing what they can come up with.

Can you talk about *Planet Coaster 2*'s different game modes?

We have three game modes on *Planet Coaster 2*. We have our Career mode, which is narrative-based. It's a mode where you go through different levels, and they have different objectives.

We have Sandbox mode, which has everything unlocked. You can just build to your heart's content. You can have unlimited money or you can adjust the settings to give yourself a challenge, or just see how well you can build a park in a blank area.

And then we have Franchise mode, which is our online mode, which allows you and other park managers to compete together against other franchises in timed challenges. So it might be: 'Which park can earn the most money in a single park day?' And you'll be working in that franchise together to build that park. It's taking turns in the park. So you'd be passing that between you. It's not simultaneous



DEV PROFILE



Rich Newbold

TITLE
Game director

FAVOURITE GAMES
Championship Manager 97/98, *Grim Fandango*, *Monkey Island 2: The Curse of Monkey Island*, *LeChuck's Revenge*

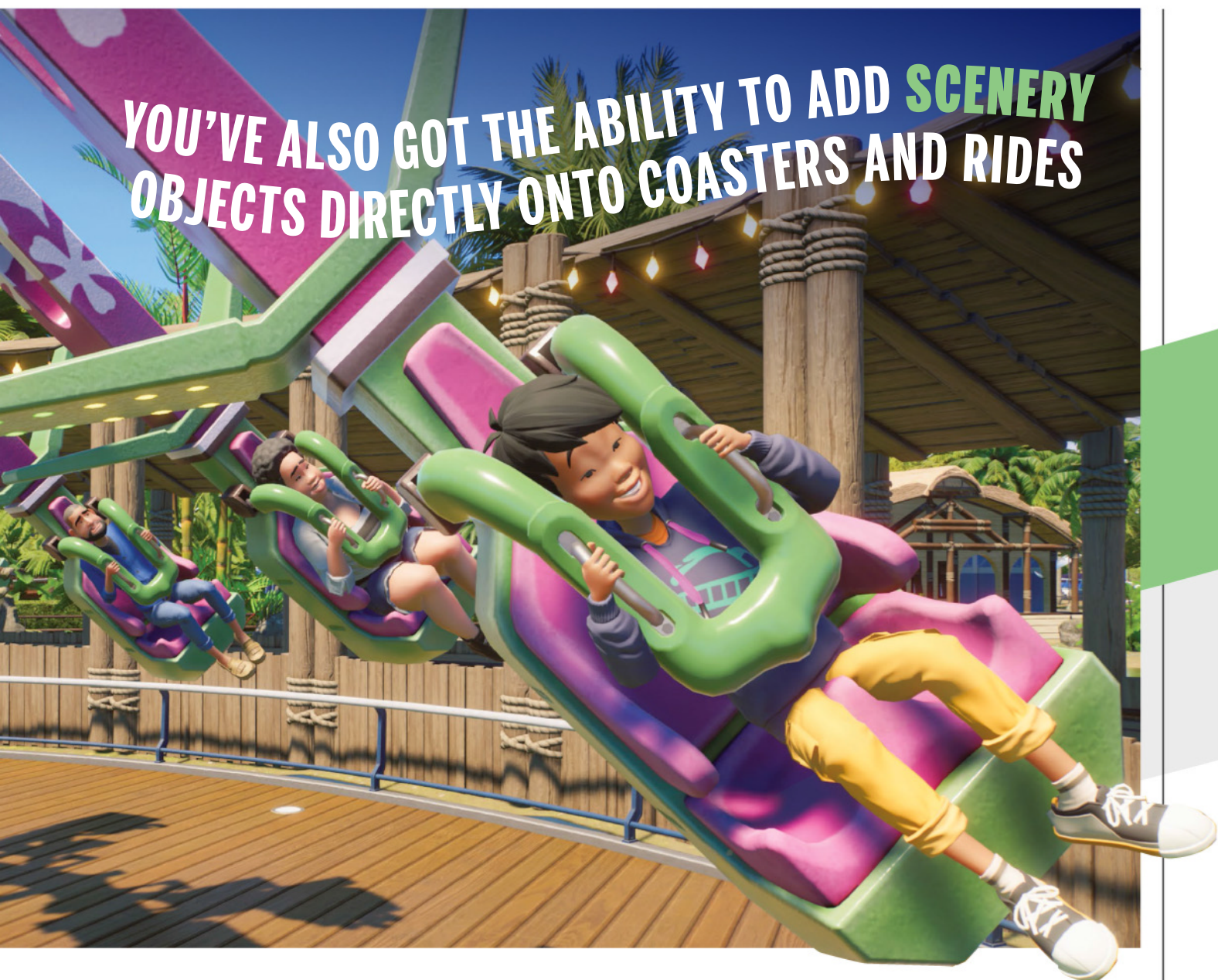
multiplayer. But you'd be working together to build a park to make sure that your franchise is the top of that leaderboard and earn rewards.

We'll be changing those challenges every few weeks. And you'll be changing which park you're submitting to those leaderboards, depending on what that challenge could be.

What's your favourite theme park?

For me, it's all about: the bigger the theme park, the better. My favourite one – I went to Universal Islands of Adventure when I was younger and I really enjoyed that. It has to be grand because my stomach is not the best. So if I'm going on something, it has to be as grand as possible to make it worthwhile if I'm going on one of these things. But I'm a big fan of the themed parks as well. So things like Disneyland and Disney World where they have specific areas of their park that are themed to a certain experience like Adventureland or Tomorrowland as well. Those ones are really cool as well because you can see how they spent a lot of time and detail dressing those areas up, and that matters to guests. ■

YOU'VE ALSO GOT THE ABILITY TO ADD **SCENERY** OBJECTS DIRECTLY ONTO COASTERS AND RIDES



from so that they can have a wonderful time in your pool.”

Briefed with the task of creating a water park with a high level, I first marvel at how realistic and lush the water looks as I plot out, piece by piece, a large swimming pool, and then carve out a meandering lazy river into and out of it. Frontier Developments has clearly made serious effort in making the water look as realistic as possible, and seeing the glimmering pools adds serious visual punch to the surrounding park. I build a flume, too, and at each stage I'm amazed at the sheer amount of creative options I have on offer, but also how I can lean into automations if I want to speed things up, or do everything manually myself if I wanted maximum control. For example, after carving out my lazy river, I need propulsion jets to actually propel the swimmers who enter it. These can be placed individually but with lots needed, I decided instead to just make use of the auto-placement system on offer, which auto-

populates the water ride with them. Within seconds I'm adding scenery to my pool, building changing rooms for my guests and hiring life guards to make sure they're kept safe while having fun.

COASTING TO VICTORY

After three hours my hands-on session comes to a close and, after chatting to Newbold about some of his favourite theme parks and PC games (see interview, left). I'm left with the impression that management simulators of all kinds, but notably those involving park management, are something Frontier Developments takes very seriously indeed. The creation and management systems on offer in *Planet Coaster 2* are mind-blowingly impressive, partnering a realistic physics system for rides (there's no impossible nonsense going on here with your coasters) with best-in-class creative options and, if you wish to engage with it, scarily deep and powerful management options. For me, though, I think what is

ABOVE: Ride routines can be individually tweaked as the player desires, with that contributing to the attraction's prestige.

looking most impressive with *Planet Coaster 2*, though, is how scaleable it is in terms of gamer access.

I've got history with rollercoaster management games, as too many other build-'em-up sims, but I'm far from a diehard sim fanatic and definitely lean more towards the creative 'I just want to build mad rides' side of the genre rather than 'I want to micromanage every aspect of my park' side. So seeing how well balanced *Planet Coaster 2* seems to be in regards to this is really refreshing. If you just want to jump into the game's unlimited money sandbox mode and create the rollercoasters and water rides of your dreams, then you can. But, equally, if you're looking for depth of management and narrative, as well as some serious challenge, be that in campaign mode or online against other park managers, then you can do that too.

As I leave Cambridge on the train I can't help but think that, if Frontier Developments ran a real theme and water park, I'd go for sure. ■



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A NEW

Z

ooming in on planets from outer space is nothing new: I've been landing on alien worlds in games like

No Man's Sky and *Kerbal Space Program* for years. The difference here is scale. The world Brendan Greene (aka PlayerUnknown) is showing me – the digital planet he's building – is the size of an actual planet.

It's called *Artemis*, and it's a planet the size of Earth. As I peer over Greene's shoulder at his monitor, the view is from orbit, with roughly half the planet visible in outer space – until he begins zooming in. And in. And in. As we dive toward the

planet's surface, terrain appears, resolving into mountains and hills. Massive forests become individual trees, and as we reach ground level I admire the textures of realistic boulders and rocks. After a quick look around at the scenery, Greene zooms way, way back out until we're up in orbit again, then zooms all the way back into another wilderness landscape of trees, hills and mountains the size of actual mountains. It's hard not to be impressed by the scale of the world and the rendering tech that generated this detailed planet in seconds.

According to Greene, *Artemis* will be a massively multiplayer sandbox capable of supporting thousands and eventually millions of players at the same time. To accomplish that ambitious goal, Greene decided he

needed to build not only a new game engine but an entirely new company: PlayerUnknown Productions. A completed *Artemis* is still a long way off – some of the technology needed to pull off Greene's vision doesn't even exist yet. But in the years since the studio was formed, it's already come a long way.

SCALING UP

Work on *Artemis* began while Greene was still with Krafton, publisher of his mega-hit battle royale game, *PUBG*. He began putting together a team to build a new survival game set on a 100x100 kilometre map, but soon began to envision an even bigger game world. During a visit to his studio in Amsterdam, Greene tells me he was "fascinated" by the sprawling maps in the *DayZ* mod for *Arma 2*, which he modded to create his first battle royale mode, and *H1Z1*, on which he served as an advisor for Sony Online Entertainment before joining Krafton to make *PUBG*. "I was always excited by that sort of massive open world, especially emergent space," he says. He eventually began considering a spherical game world to avoid the traditional borders and barricades at the edges

To build his digital planet, **PUBG**'s Brendan Greene first had to build his own studio.

WORLD

By Christopher Livingston

of the map. A planet-shaped map, in other words.

"How big can we go?" he asked himself. "It eventually turned into Earth-scale, because it was a nice challenge." As his vision got bigger, Greene decided to leave Krafton and form his own company. "What we're doing is just super risky, right? And eventually I decided it's better just to do it myself. It was a lot harder than I thought," he adds with a laugh.

EXCITEMENT AND TERROR

Greene admits to a few misfires while recruiting and hiring people in the early days of building his dream team. "It's my own fault, really," he says. "I had very little experience in gaming. I'd been doing it less than five years. And especially from a management point

of view, I have little to no experience managing people."

One of the issues was "relying on people's experience, and maybe not recognising they didn't have the right kind of experience" Greene says, admitting that things were "kind of just a mess for a bit". Pitching prospective team members on the idea of a planet-sized game world is "like building a combustion engine in an age of horses," he says. "Trying to find people that want to do something new, and have that mindset, it takes a lot longer than you think.

"For me, it's like we're trying to build a next-generation game engine, simply put. And it's not just a game engine, but it's a world engine, or a digital place engine. But really, it's building a holodeck, building a space

MAIN: Yes, the digital planet has its own moon.

that you can create whatever experiences you want."

I ask how people react when he first pitches his vision to them, and he tells me what happened recently while describing the idea of a planet-sized game world that can support a million players to a prospective new hire. "She was just staring with a mixture of excitement and terror. Pure terror in her eyes, like, 'You want to do what now?'"

Greene's head of studio, Kim Nordstrom, formerly chief strategy officer at Paradox Interactive, uses a similar phrase to describe his first impressions of the project. "I had the same reaction like everyone else. First of all, it's super abstract, and so big, and super risky, and super expensive," Nordstrom says. "I always describe it as exciting and terrifying" ➤

» at the same time. It really is that mixture. ‘You want to do what? But that’s crazy!’ And then 30 seconds later you go, ‘Oh, if we can do that... holy f**k, that’d be amazing.’”

Not everyone I spoke to at PlayerUnknown Productions was intimidated by the scope and scale of the project. “It sounds doable,” was Dmytro Pustovoytov’s comparatively blunt reaction upon hearing about *Artemis* for the first time. Pustovoytov is Greene’s lead render programmer, formerly of Ubisoft Kyiv in Ukraine and senior render programmer at Wargaming. “I think we can achieve it. And I want to contribute,” he says. “I want to be a person that helps to push the limit to get to the place where we can get a proper planetary scale game, Earth-sized game.”

At the time Pustovoytov joined the team, there were fewer than a dozen people on the project, and he’s now one of the longest-serving team members. “The thing that attracted me the most is basically tech. I like working on tech and I like a challenge, a good challenge,” especially one “with much bigger ambitions” than most studios offer, he says. “That interests and intrigues me as an engineer.”

OPEN COMMS

Other members of the team spoke about more than just the ambition of building a digital planet, such as the ways in which PlayerUnknown

Productions feels different from other studios they’ve worked at. Greene encourages open communication between team members and departments – and while those don’t sound like groundbreaking concepts, according to technical director Laurent Gorga, it can be unusual in game dev.

“In traditional triple-A, we tend to keep everything separate [internally], or very, very secret,” says Gorga, who previously served as games leader for Amazon and technical director at both Hanger 13, makers of the *Mafia* series, and 2K Czech. “Coming from more traditional game development, I would say this team, the management

team, including myself, we are way more transparent than I’m used to. We share all the information [with each other].”

“There’s a benefit to having a small studio,” says Scott Davidson, former art director for Facepunch Studios’ open-world survival game *Rust*, and now creative director at PlayerUnknown Productions. “Everybody’s responsible for actually making the game fun.” Artists don’t have to stick to just art, Davidson explains that they can contribute ideas for other elements, like gameplay. “Everybody needs to feel like they participate in game design. So we have no official game designers

RIGHT: Building a world means building an engine and doing a lot of math.

MAIN: In a world the size of Earth, real estate shouldn’t be a problem.



**PLAYERUNKNOWN
PRODUCTIONS FEELS
DIFFERENT FROM
OTHER STUDIOS
THEY’VE WORKED AT**



PUBG creator and founder of
PlayerUnknown Productions
Brendan Greene.

on the project," he says. "We do that ourselves. I think that's quite different than most places."

"There's a mindset of 'make sure it's right', not 'make sure it's done,'" says Alexander Helliwell, senior environmental artist, whose experience includes Vertigo Games and contract work for Ubisoft. "I think with this small team as well, everyone's focused towards being a

PLAYERWELLKNOWN

Charting the path of Brendan Greene's battle royale career



LAST-MAN STANDING 2013

Greene created a popular last-man standing mode for *DayZ*, a mod for *Arma 2*.



BATTLE ROYALE 2014

In *Arma 3*, *PlayerUnknown's Battle Royale* mod added a plane that scattered players across the map.



H1Z1 2015

Greene consulted on *H1Z1*, which blasted battle royale into the mainstream and the esports scene.



PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS 2017

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds becomes the most actively played game on Steam.

game developer. Titles become a bit irrelevant at some point, because it's just like... I'm not an environment artist, or a character artist, or effects artist, or animator. I mean, we are all those things. But everyone's working towards the same goal," he says.

"We're trying to foster an environment where it's OK to fail," Greene tells me. "It's OK to try something and not be right, or not the right way to do things. To build something new, you need that level of confidence that your boss is not going to come down on you because you've done something the wrong way."

For now, more specific details about the game engine and Earth-sized planet *PlayerUnknown Productions* is building are being kept under wraps. A tech demo is planned to let players get their first

look at an early version of *Artemis*, though a release date for that demo hasn't yet been announced or even hinted at yet. I'm curious to see what players make of it: the tech is impressive, but as we saw most recently in *Starfield*, generating a beautiful planet is just one part of the challenge. Turning that planet into an interesting and compelling place players will want to spend their time is another, even tougher endeavour.

"What we're doing is new, and we may run into roadblocks along the way that don't allow us to go as big or as quick [as we'd like]," says Greene, adding, "This is going to be a bumpy road. But if you come along with us for the journey, we'll have highs, we'll have lows, but it'll be a great journey and we'll have something very special at the end." ■



TALES

from the

DESERT



As **BLACK DESERT ONLINE** celebrates its tenth anniversary, we speak to the community about its adventures in Pearl Abyss' MMO

By Rick Lane



Beynac-et-Cazenac is a medieval village wrapped around a limestone cliff in the south-east of France's Dordogne valley. Perched atop the cliff-face is the Château de Beynac, an imposing fortress built by the barons of Beynac in the 12th century, featured in films such as Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel*. Beneath the castle, the surrounding village hugs the hillside tightly, its narrow buildings connected by twisting streets so steep they threaten to tip you into the river 300 metres below.

Here, hundreds of *Black Desert* players have gathered to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the popular Korean MMO. Beynac is the inspiration for *Black Desert*'s in-game city of Heidel, and as such makes an ideal venue for the occasion. For one cloudy Saturday in summer, reality and fiction collide. The castle is adorned with *Black Desert* banners, while the village's precipitous streets have been temporarily redubbed 'the adventurer's path'.

It's on this path where I spend much of the day, speaking to the players, guildmasters, streamers and cosplayers about their experiences in *Black Desert*. Across the day, I hear stories of epic wars, murderous outlaws, record breakers, virtual meet-cutes, and a small dog who became the symbol of a nation.

THE COSPLAYERS (AND BOYFRIENDS)

The day starts, somewhat unceremoniously, in a car park at the foot of Beynac. As everyone signs in for the event, I spot two reserved-looking guys sat on a wall near the riverbank, away from the larger crowd, and went over to chat. They introduced themselves as Lotus and Setheal. Lotus has been playing *Black Desert* for two months, Setheal for nearly a decade. In fact, Setheal has been playing since before the game was available in the West,

joining a Korean server via VPN. "It was not really allowed," he says. "The first thing I saw was actually a leak from the game in 2013, and I was like, 'That's the best-looking MMO I have ever seen,' and that's why I joined the Korean server first."

I ask Setheal what his favourite memory from the game is. "Probably the fact that I met my girlfriend thanks to *Black Desert*." Both Setheal and Lotus, it turns out, are partners with two of the event's professional cosplayers – DrawMeACosplay, and Kazy. They introduce me. Kazy, like Setheal, is a long-time *Black Desert* player. "I saw the game before it even came out, like in 2014," she says. "I think I downloaded the Korean server when it was in alpha and managed to play a little bit." Kazy says she was drawn to the game by its horse-breeding life skill, which lets players pursue a life of raising and training horses. Her cosplay for the event is of the Black Knight class's Rosa Cassius armour, which she made in 2017.



WISH YOU WERE HERE *Real-life inspiration*

Beynac, the setting for *Black Desert*'s tenth anniversary event, is also the inspiration for the game's in-game city of Heidel. Below, you can see the similarities between the two.



BEYNAC



HEIDEL

DrawMeACosplay, meanwhile, was drawn into *Black Desert* by Sethael, after they met via a mutual friend. In the game, she specialises in collecting herbs. "Every time I find a new rare one, I'm pretty happy about that," she says. "I remember waiting hours to collect one that just pops in the morning. Just waiting for it to pop."

While DrawMeACosplay met Sethael online, they largely play individually. "I like to do my own thing because I'm really a casual player," she says. They both work together on the cosplays, however. The costume she's wearing at the event – the Ranger class – took 18 months to complete. "I wanted to find challenging costumes, because I see all the details on that and I knew I was probably going to learn so many things because of that costume."

PRODIGAL PVP PLAYERS

Trekking up the streets of Beynac, I come to a raised dais with a stone bench, where I take a short rest. A group of players are descending from the castle, and a voice calls out, "You're almost halfway!"

This turns out to be Blue Squadron, a streamer and content creator for *Black Desert*. A player for eight years, Blue Squadron formerly ran a PvP guild. Blue Squadron is visiting Beynac with his friend and former guildmate Layfonda, who tells me his favourite memories of the game are the "old-school PvP days" running with the Guild. "You would have like 30v30 people, 40v40 people. And it's just a ball fight, it's just a mess. You don't know what's happening. You just have Blue Squadron going, 'Guys come on, push up to the frontlines!'"

As the pair are talking, I get the sense they both feel the PvP element of *Black Desert* isn't what it used to be. Certainly, Pearl Abyss has changed how PvP works over the years, changing guild wars so that they only happen if both sides declare it, and increasing the amount of time solo players can grind in instanced zones, making it harder for PvP players to find people to fight.

Blue Squadron says he stopped running his PvP guild because managing it could be like a full-time job. "HR issues are a big deal," he says. "Making sure the community is active, people have a voice. People are talking, people are happy, right? Like, if you have a bad fight, you have to worry about the morale of the guild." Blue Squadron now runs a more general PvX guild, as well as running his channel.

Layfonda, meanwhile, is more critical of how *Black Desert* has altered the status of PvP in the game over the years. "There's more people, but because of more people, a lot of them don't like the PvP aspect," he says. "So it's taking the approach of

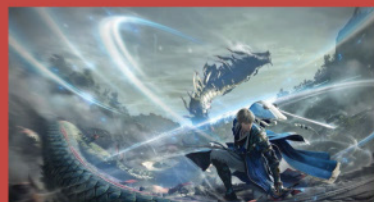
the more casual gamer." He says the game is still a "blast to play", but clearly misses the days when PvP was less regimented and more of a free-for-all.

Later on in the day, during the event's livestreamed keynote, Pearl Abyss announces a new suite of separate, dedicated hardcore PvP servers, where players start at level 60 with preset gear, are completely free to fight one another, and have to fight their way out of a prison when killed. After the keynote, I catch up with Layfonda for his take on these new servers. "Very good. Very good," he says. "Again, I've been playing since the start of BDO, and what

He stopped running his PvP guild because managing it could be like a full-time job

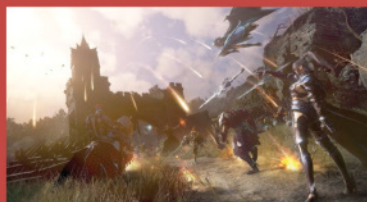
ABOVE: The Château de Beynac was constructed in the 12th century by the barons of Beynac.

BOTTOM LEFT: The event's cosplayers pose in their armour at the foot of Beynac village, the designs based on various class outfits from *Black Desert Online*.



LEFT: Announced at the event, Dosa is the latest of 28 classes playable in *Black Desert Online*.

RIGHT: *Black Desert Online* made its name through its real-time combat.



they mentioned there was the prime-time *BDO*, where I loved it. It's going to be phenomenal."

THE EMBLEM OF THE DOG

As the village of Beynac falls away and the castle walls rear up alongside me, I encounter another group of PvP players, who all belong to a guild called Barcode. With an alliance of 150 players, Barcode specialises in "endgame" PvP, specifically "node wars" and siege wars. The former see guilds fighting over individual points on a map, whereas the latter involve capturing multiple nodes to occupy entire in-game continents, known as territories.

Among the Barcode group are husband and wife duo Thail and Blacksoul, the latter of whom relates an anecdote from their time playing *Black Desert*. "There was one time when we both, the guild we were in, won one of the territories."

Now, a fun mechanical quirk of *Black Desert* is that, if a guild wins a territory, they can change the emblems within that territory, flags, tents, walls, to anything they like. At the time, Blacksoul and Thail had a dog named Tuff. "We put a picture of our dog as the emblem, and then all the guards in the town had the picture of our dog's name." The picture also happened to depict Tuff wearing a crown, a fitting embodiment of the guild's triumph. Tuff, sadly, has since passed away. But let the record state that, once upon a time, he symbolised victory for an entire continent.

THE RED PLAYER

"I'm very involved with other players, whether they want to or not." This sinister phrase is uttered by Trisiplays, who I encounter across the bridge from the castle gatehouse. Trisiplays is a 'red' player, who deliberately plays *Black Desert* with a negative karma rating.

Karma is a system designed to regulate player behaviour in *Black Desert*. Actions like getting caught stealing from NPCs or killing other Adventurers can impact a player's karma rating. "Once you have negative karma, you become a red player," Trisiplays explains. Not only can red players be freely attacked by other adventurers, they're also attacked on sight by city guards, and lose more combat XP than normal on death.

Trisiplays describes to me the day on which he, as he puts it "went red". It happened during a guild war that broke out between two guilds over a disagreement about a particular spot for experience grinding. "My guild leader at the time tasked me to target their protected members," Trisiplays explains. "You can protect members from guild wars so they can't get attacked without a penalty. But I was open to take those penalties to take those targets out."

Each life skill is designed to keep players occupied for countless hours

to attack you in a safe zone, but you have to fight me outside of town.' So very respectful."

Nonetheless, playing with a red name is significantly more challenging than playing the game regularly. Trisiplays must often resort to elaborate trickery simply to get around. "I definitely walk a lot on the roofs, because down in the streets is just not a thing," he says.

THE LIFE SKILLS MASTER

Black Desert is known for its spectacular combat, but it also lets players pursue a more peaceful virtual existence through its life skills. Life skills are in-game pursuits that would be considered side activities in most games, such as fishing, hunting, alchemy, gathering herbs and so forth. But

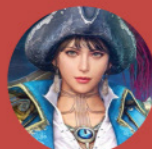
CLASS ACT

Black Desert has a whopping 28 classes



SAGE

The Sage has the ability to manipulate space and, at higher levels, time. He's able to alter his psychological form to evade enemy attacks.



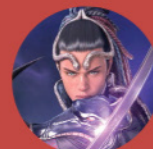
CORSAIR

A Corsair can transform into a mermaid and unleash some devastating tidal wave attacks on her opponents.



SCHOLAR

Far from a retiring bookworm, the scholar can harness the power of gravity to unleash attacks using her twin hammers.



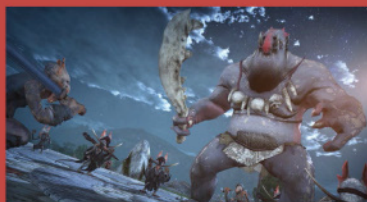
HASHASHIN

The Hashashin can manipulate the Desert's sands, conjuring huge dust devils that batter foes into submission.



LEFT: Players pursue non-combat life skills, including farming, sailing, and alchemy.

RIGHT: It was always a good-looking game, but it has also advanced massively since it released.





ABOVE: Lucy (aka Kazy) with her boyfriend George (aka Lotus) and friend and fellow cosplayer Rhian.

LEFT: The castle keep is where the event's keynote was held, and marks the end of the adventurer's path.



each of these has its own levelling system that lets them become a player's entire focus if they so choose.

Each life skill is designed to keep players occupied for countless hours, but that hasn't stopped one player from trying to master all of them. Enter BairogHaan, a streamer and Twitch Partner who has been playing *Black Desert* since its inception. "Basically, my goal in the game is to get a high level life-skilling in many different life skills."

Of the ten available life skills in the game, BairogHaan currently has reached the max level of 50 in five of them, a process which has taken him most of the time he's been playing. He says that his favourite life skill to play was initially gathering "for the first three, four years of *BDO*". But this has since changed to hunting "because hunting is much more profitable at the moment".

Even with half of *Black Desert's* skills at level 50, the challenge ahead of BairogHaan is steep. As he points out, there are some life skills that basically cannot be maxed out. One example is sailing. "Sailing is one of the hardest life skills to level up. It takes literally a hundred years to level up to max level." In addition, developer Pearl Abyss recently updated the max level for life skills to 100. "So I can go further, but currently, the goal is to get to 50."

I ask BairogHaan what it is about *Black Desert's* life skills that intrigue him so much: "It's part of my daily routine. Time where I can just chill and focus on getting the goals." Also, while the destination may be unreachable, the journey has amassed BairogHaan quite the following. BairogHaan has built a Twitch account with 20,000 followers. "I know a lot about life-skilling, so they come to



» ask questions, what is good, what is bad and so on, so I try to teach and help other people.”

THE RECORD BREAKER

Late afternoon in Beynac, it starts to rain hard, and many attendees take shelter in a building adjacent to the castle gatehouse, where drinks are being served. As I wander around, I’m gently told by a player that I overlooked him earlier in the day, and that he has a story to tell.

That player is RisingSun, aka PvEnvironment. “I’m currently the highest player on combat level in Europe,” he tells me. It’s a record he has set several times, becoming the first player in Europe to reach levels 66, 67 and 68 for combat in *Black Desert*.

To reach such a level in Pearl Abyss’ MMO requires an enormous amount of grinding. Levelling up from 66 to 67, for example, took PvEnvironment an entire year. “A lot of people ask me how you can grind more than two hours a day,” says PvEnvironment, who works in computer science by day. “For me it’s relaxing. I love grinding, so it’s relaxing for me.”

For PvEnvironment, grinding in *Black Desert* is a fundamental part of his daily routine. It’s also netted him a small Twitch following, with 4,000 people tuning in to watch him push his combat level ever higher. But that

ABOVE: Modern Beynac’s population is somewhere between 500 and 600 people.

RIGHT: After a long day wandering up and down Beynac’s streets, attendees gather in the castle for an evening meal.



BALL POINTS

The key announcements from Heidel Ball 2024



GET A DOSA THIS

The 28th class, Dosa, arrived just after the event. He specialises in sword combat and tricking enemies with smoke-based magic from his traditional Korean pipe.



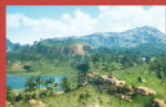
SEOUL MUSIC

The second part of *Black Desert's* Land of the Morning Light expansion adds the city of Seoul. Seoul brings with it new quests, events, and concludes the expansion's story.



MAP FILLER

Two new regions were unveiled to follow *Land of the Morning Light*: Seoul, called Mountain of Dawn Break, and a castle-themed dungeon called the Demon Land.



BACK FOR THE FUTURE

Pearl Abyss plans to explore the history of the world it created. Players will be sent years into the past, where the worlds of *Black Desert* looked very different.

routine was upset last year, when he was unexpectedly banned from the game. The ban was allegedly for macro use, which is a bannable offence in *BDO*. "There was a banwave," he says. "They didn't explain it in detail, but we think it was the anti-cheat program," he says.

PvEnvironment livestreamed about his ban, and says the stream resulted in a flurry of news stories across specialist media, such as the German site MeinMMO. After 28 days, the ban was lifted. Despite this, PvEnvironment is clearly still bothered by the ban. "I got a lot of support. But I needed, I think, three months to be a normal player again." Throughout the duration of the ban, he struggled to focus on his work. He tried playing *Black Desert* with a new account, but he says he couldn't escape the spectre of the ban. People who recognised him from social media would accuse him of being a cheater, while some would try to be reassuring, saying it was "nice that you are still trying". "It was amazing, but at the same time heartbreaking," he says.

PvEnvironment says he never found out what caused the initial ban, nor what spurred Pearl Abyss to lift it. He says there was no acknowledgement that an error had been made, despite many players as well as him having their bans lifted. "There was no refund or something for the time [I] missed playing. But at least I was happy to play again."

After the event, I contacted Pearl Abyss to ask what the developer's policies are regarding player bans in *Black Desert* for using macros, whether there was a wave of erroneous bans last year, and its policy regarding bans that are issued by mistake. On the subject of banning players for macros, Pearl Abyss states, "Yes. We regularly (permanently) ban

accounts that use unauthorised programs and macros. For accounts that are suspected of usage of unauthorised programs and macros, we first apply temporary bans while we perform investigations."

Regarding the alleged wave of erroneous bans, Pearl Abyss quotes from a report on an investigation the company conducted last year, looking into restrictions on 'unauthorised program users', which "reconfirmed that there were no issues with the detection results of our 'unauthorised program and data tampering detection system'". However, Pearl Abyss "discovered the possibility that our strengthened restriction criteria included outlier cases unrelated to *Black Desert*, such as PCs infected by viruses, malicious code, or certain 'PC management programs,' which could affect the detection systems". Taking these variables into account, the company "determined that imposing restrictions on accounts without major abnormalities in their in-game records would be unjust and made the decision to lift the restrictions on these accounts".

As for the policy on bans handed out by mistake, Pearl Abyss referred players to Article 16 of its terms of service, adding, "Not every case is completely black and white, so we handle detections of cheating on a case-by-case basis. In the case of such players affected by the banwave, we maintained active communication with them all throughout their ban appeal process, and addressed any issues individually with them as best we could."

Since the reinstatement of his account, PvEnvironment has continued to pursue new combat levels, pushing to level 68 and building his Twitch following. "I learned about so many people who [also] have goals like me," he says. "South America, North America. It was amazing to find these people and we are all kind of friends now." He's also part of *Black Desert's* Ambassador program, through which experienced players share their knowledge of the game with newcomers. "It's normal players, but they like to help new adventurers," he says. "It's a nice community. I really like it."

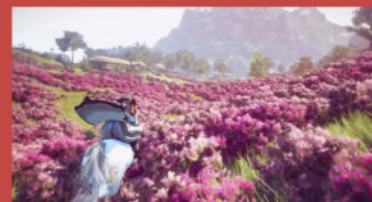
As night falls, everyone gathers together for dinner, after which a prize draw is held for the community members. For most of the day, I've encountered *Black Desert's* community as individuals or in small groups, hearing their experiences in the game as disparate, isolated tales. Here though, the passion of the community as a unit becomes clear. As each winner is called forth, the front of the room (where most are sat) explodes with cheering and roaring, entire tables of community members often leaping from their seats. With fans like this, it's clear why *Black Desert* has thrived for ten years, and why its creators are confident it'll be around for ten more. ■

PvEnvironment says he never found out what caused the initial ban



LEFT: Naturally, the game also included fishing and cooking.

RIGHT: The recent, Land of the Morning Light expansion delves heavily into the game's Korean heritage.



The title 'DOWN BY THE RIVER' is rendered in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters. The text is centered and overlaid on two large, overlapping circles: a teal one on top and a red one on the bottom. The circles are partially obscured by the text. Surrounding the text are numerous small, teal-colored icons, including various symbols like a sun, a flower, a leaf, a bird, and a gear, scattered across the page.

DOWN BY THE RIVER

For the first anniversary of
BALDUR'S GATE III, PC Gamer
spoke exclusively to **SWEN VINCKE**
about the past, present and
future of Larian Studios

WORDS
Fraser Brown

ILLUSTRATION
John Strike

It's early summer, almost a year since Larian launched *Baldur's Gate III* – a year in which the studio has collected a vast number of awards and accolades for its monumental RPG – and the team has swapped the Forgotten Realms for the swelteringly hot Spanish city of Barcelona. Larian is here to discuss its next game behind closed doors. A couple of days ago, on July 8, it held a summit to talk about kicking off a new RPG. “Lift off,” as CEO Swen Vincke puts it.

There's the crackle of electricity in the air, not because a dragonborn sorcerer has just cast chain lightning, but because the team is about to set off on a brand-new adventure. Larian's developers are now spread all over, including Dublin, Ghent, Warsaw and here in Barcelona, where so many of them have gathered. Much of the excitement, then, is also down to a lot of them being in one place, rather than distributed across the world.

It wasn't all that long ago that Larian was comparatively tiny. “These are guesstimates,” says Vincke, “but I think that *Divinity: Original Sin 1* must have been around 40 people, and then *Divinity: Original Sin 2* was around 120-ish. And now we're approaching 500.” The new Warsaw studio has added a chunk, and Vincke says that it's “beefed up” QA, adding more internal playtesters to prepare for what's coming next.

So what is coming next? Well, that's a secret that Larian's not quite

TOP LARIAN HITS

Liked Baldur's Gate III? Then play these, too



DIVINE DIVINITY 2002
An action-RPG with plenty of hack-and-slash action, if you like *Diablo* then you'll like this.



DIVINITY: DRAGON COMMANDER 2013
Larian does an RTS with politics, strategy and, yes, dragons.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2014
A game-changing release for Larian.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II 2017
Larian released another superb fantasy RPG.

ready to share. Chatting to members of the studio following the summit, however, reveals a lot, from hints about the scope of its next two projects to why the team stopped working on what was shaping up to become *Baldur's Gate IV*.

LITTLE BIG DEVELOPER

Years ago, I visited Larian's Ghent studio for the conclusion of *D:OS2*'s successful Kickstarter, and while it had grown considerably after *D:OS1*, it still had this small studio energy. Writing director Adam Smith, who joined Larian for *Baldur's Gate III* after years in the games journalism trenches, reckons that energy continues to be maintained despite

the huge growth: “I was a big fan of Larian, and my biggest fear joining Larian was growth might make it not the studio that I saw from when I'd spoken to Swen and other people in the past. It hasn't changed. I mean, it's crazy.”

“I call it chaos at scale,” Vincke adds. “We're a studio that gives a lot of freedom to developers. We encourage it, actually, bottom up, because it's unmanageable otherwise. Different people have to do their own thing. And then obviously, we have to manage the chaos that comes out of it, so that's a large part of the job. But the fact that we start like that, and we have been on purpose keeping studios not too large – so they're basically people that all know each other still, which is a very important part – is the thing that makes it work. It's as simple as that. So it is just empowering developers themselves.”

This structure of flexibility and experimentation conveniently matches Larian's design philosophy, which Vincke describes as “player first, always”. And this has been evident across all of its games, where player agency is paramount. “I started my summit here by literally telling [Larian], treat the player like you would want to be treated. That's literally how you should make a game. I keep on repeating, if you see something in the game that you would not want to see in another game, don't do it – just keep on working on it, or don't do it at all.” Larian's systems all stem from that rule, which is why its RPGs don't feel prescriptive. “If it's on rails, you can go to a theme park; this is not a theme park.”

Giving players access to powerful

BELOW LEFT: Taking on Raphael in his House of Hope. What an encounter!

BELOW RIGHT: Strong armour choice there.



IT WASN'T ALL THAT LONG AGO THAT LARIAN WAS COMPARATIVELY TINY

spells like teleportation or talking to corpses early on really encapsulates this philosophy. In *Baldur's Gate III*, you have so many ways to get out of a scrape, uncover hidden areas and get up to all sorts of mischief right away, rather than having to wait 50 hours before you can start truly doing what you want. But this also means Larian's games have to be designed in such a way that the developers must get into the players' heads and figure out what they might want to do.

"We have to foresee a whole bunch of things," says Vincke, "and then we have to make sure there's a fallback for all the things players will come up with." And then there needs to be all these rewards and motivators to keep players exploring. Fancy items, compelling storylines, big surprises. "And that's how we approach games. "So everything we do, every thing within the studio, is built to allow us to do more of that."

A PUBLISHER'S NIGHTMARE

One of the reasons Larian can do this is because it isn't beholden to anyone else. It's an independent studio that doesn't need to rely on publishers, and while it does have investment from the likes of Tencent, they don't have a seat at the table.

"If you see it, it'll scare you, as a shareholder, as a publisher," says Vincke. "The very first thing you will try to do is get it under control – you will try to scope it, you will try to box it, you will try to control it, which is exactly the opposite of what we want to do. These days, especially when you have so much entertainment, people are only going to put their time into something that keeps on engaging them. In the type of game

that we make, that means that we need to have a lot of content, and you put a lot of content in there that never nobody's ever going to see. Which is really not obvious, right? Because it's like, why are we spending a million dollars on a dragon, which nobody's ever going to see, except like five people who made that obscure choice? Because if they see it, they have to be happy too. So that's why I put the bloody dragon there."

While Larian's approach would likely terrify a lot of publishers and investors, there's no doubt that many of them would still like a

piece of this pie. The industry is obsessed with the studio, and all eyes are on what it's planning next. In the year since launch, it has undeniably become one of the world's most influential developers. But Vincke attributes its series of big successes, from *D:OS* onwards, to its biggest failure: *Divinity 2: Ego Draconis*.

Ego Draconis was the third game in the *Divinity* series, following on from *Divine Divinity* and *Beyond Divinity*. Vincke recalls that it had a lot of things that could have made it a "breakthrough game", but unfortunately it didn't come together. "It was ambitious, had a lot of stuff



Swen Vincke

going on, but none of it was really well done," he says. "So everything was really the product of being too ambitious with too small a team and not having enough resources, and then the publisher insisted on releasing it when it wasn't ready. And so I fought very long and hard about that, because I thought about quitting at that point. You can't just go from failure to failure to failure. You've got to do something right. This is when I dropped publishers."

Vincke still believes the game had a lot going for it, like the combat and the narrative, even if the latter "didn't deliver". But Larian had attempted to

do too much. "We couldn't do all these things because we were too small. So we needed to reinvent ourselves. I said, 'If we do one thing right, it has to be the combat, and you have to be able to play it with your friends'. And that was *D:OSI*. The story was really tacked on. *D:OSI* was a success, so I looked at that and said, 'Now we need to nail the story'."

As well as this reinvention came things like the complete dominance of digital distribution "and there weren't 320,000 middlemen that were just taking cuts on everything," as well as the rise of Kickstarter and Early Access. This helped Larian

UNSURPRISINGLY, BALDUR'S GATE III HAS FILLED THE STUDIO'S COFFERS

fund *D:OSI* and 2, and then actually make money out of them. Now, though, it's in a position where it doesn't need Kickstarter. Unsurprisingly, *Baldur's Gate III* has filled the studio's coffers.

"We launched, and we were nervous as hell," Smith remembers. "Early Access helped with that, because you knew that people enjoyed what you had, but it was still really nerve-racking. And I remember at some point in the night, we were having a celebration. We were looking at the Steam numbers, seeing the numbers going up and up and up. And the first time I spoke to Swen after launch, I said something like, 'Did you expect this?' And he said, 'You know what this means? It means we get to do it again'."

THE SUMMER OF RPGS

Baldur's Gate III launched during a busy summer for RPGs. *Diablo IV* had just arrived, and both *Starfield* and *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty* were imminent. Larian shifted the release date to avoid a clash. "Big comes before small," says Vincke. "The biggest release gets the space, and then the others have to move for it. This has always been a universal truth. So we recognised *Starfield* as a bigger game than us. That's why we had to move. Players were not going to be playing multiple RPGs of this size at the same time. That's impossible. So you were going to force players to make a choice, so we said, 'OK, we'll take that choice away and move elsewhere.'"

Instead of *Starfield* sucking all the oxygen out of the room when it launched, however, *Baldur's Gate III* kept selling, and continues to. Since



launch, Larian has released a large number of patches and hotfixes, squashing bugs as well as adding new features, an epilogue, more evil options – countless additions, tweaks and treats. But now *BGIII* is done, for the most part.

“A complete experience,” says Vincke. “There’s lots of stuff we wanted to do that we ended up not doing. People always ask what are the features that you didn’t want to cut. But in fairness, I think you got what you paid for when you start playing the game. You got a good experience. You had a lot of choices, you were rewarded for those choices, the game respected them in many, many ways. You got a good character development experience. You had fun in combat – lots of tactical combat that you can approach in many, many different ways. These were the things we wanted to create. We’re moving on, in our hearts the game is done.”

Larian has been discussing *Baldur’s Gate III* for years, and working on it for a lot longer, so while Vincke and Smith still talk about it with enthusiasm and eagerly share anecdotes about its development, it’s tinged with, if not exhaustion, then at least a readiness to be done with the game. *Baldur’s Gate III* was initially planned to be a one-shot. No expansions. No sequels. At least not from Larian. But there was a period when more *Baldur’s Gate* was on the cards.

BALDUR’S GAOL

“So if something is super successful, obviously everyone’s [asking] you, ‘When are you going to make the next one?’”, says Vincke. “And when you, as a developer, come out of this

LARIAN STUDIOS FACT FILE

A dev with serious heritage



Founded: 1996

Founder: Swen Vincke

Headquarters: Ghent, Belgium

Studios: seven: Ghent, Quebec City, Dublin, Kuala Lumpur, Guildford, Barcelona, Warsaw

Employees: 470 (as of 2024)

First project: *The Lady, the Mage and the Knight* (unreleased)

Notable releases: *Divinity* series, *Baldur’s Gate III*

Website: larian.com

little miserable cave that you’ve been sitting in for many, many hours as you’re finishing your thing, you’re vulnerable. You’re emotionally drained, because you don’t know what the reaction of the people is going to be; there’s so much hope and anticipation in there, there’s a lot of responsibility. So you tend to be prone to do the obvious thing, which was really just make an add-on, or a standalone add-on, or start working on a sequel, because it’s the easiest route to take. And we actually started doing that, because we’ve got the engine, got everything in here, all we need to do is add extra levels – how hard can it be?

“It’s something that you all would have liked, I think. I’m sure, actually. And we actually went pretty fast, because the production machine was still warm. You could already play stuff. But you played it and you looked and it, and, like, you know, this is OK. I mean, we’ll probably have to redo it ten times. And do we really want to do this for the next

three years? Because we thought we’d make it in one year, and then you could see it’s not going to happen, it’s going to take two, three years. And having just done six years of D&D, which is not our own thing, are we really going to spend all this time on this and abandon our own plans? Yeah, maybe not for an add-on, but maybe *Baldur’s Gate IV*? That makes a lot of sense. So why don’t we do it for *Baldur’s Gate IV*? Oh, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Let’s make *Baldur’s Gate IV*. All the stuff that we did for this thing, we can just move it in there, people are gonna love it. Go for it. And then the same thought process again.”

At this point, Vincke dramatically sighs, reliving the moment he decided he didn’t want to be trapped in a D&D-shaped prison. “Another X amount of years, same thing, exactly the same mechanics, same problems that we actually already solved, just evolving them. And then you start looking at the other things that you had planned and pushing them back, and then you’ve come back to your senses, because by then the vulnerability is gone.”

Staring ahead at this less than ideal future, Vincke stopped thinking about the easiest route. “We should be looking at how we can do stuff that we get excited about.” After a long overdue break during Christmas, he had a reality check, and then talked to the team about the prospect of moving on. “It very rapidly turned, and I don’t think, as developers, we ever felt better since we took that decision. Honestly, you really cannot explain or express it, how liberated we are. So morale is super high, just because we’re doing new stuff again.”

BELOW LEFT: There can be only one!

BELOW RIGHT: You must gather your party before venturing forth.



Swen Vincke

☛ We're doing our own thing again, we're not rehashing, we're not trying to convert rules from 50 years ago into something new."

Vincke and Smith emphasise that it was not so much an issue with D&D – "It will always be one of the coolest things I ever did," says Smith – but that Larian was tired and needed something new to enliven it again. "It needs to get the spark," says Vincke. "What we did here at the summit was pitch to our own teams. 'So this is the stuff that we're doing, are you excited?' It's the question everyone was asking: are you excited? You have to have that.

DOUBLING DOWN

While one is further along, the plan is to develop two new games concurrently, but that's already proving to be a challenge. "We had some people who were dedicated to the other one, and they just got swallowed by the ambitions of the one that we want to release first," says Vincke. "So we will try to do it concurrently, but we have to figure out how to leave people alone."

With two games on the slate, one might imagine that Larian's going to rein in its ambitions, at least when it comes to each individual game. But that's not a very Larian thing to do. "We always say we do," says Vincke, "but then we start thinking, and the machine is meant to make large games.

"We were made for making large, ambitious RPGs and to try new stuff. One of the core problems – it's not really a problem – but one of the core problems to do what you're suggesting is that we actually know what we want from our gameplay



Baldur's Gate III has, to date, won more than 32 individual game awards, including a clean sweep of all major Game of the Year awards, including top gongs at the Golden Joystick Awards, Game Awards, GDC Awards, BAFTAs and DICE Awards, as well as being awarded PC Gamer's own Game of the Year Award.

systems, how to evolve them, how to do new things... and they're all big."

One of the tricky parts of following up a very big game with more big games is trying to find new things to fill them with. "One of the biggest problems we have now is that whenever we're talking about things, we say we did that in *Baldur's Gate III*," says Smith. "And it turns out, we did a lot of things in *Baldur's Gate III* when we think back to it. But it was the same during development. Have they already seen this pattern? Have they already used these verbs in this order? Have they already had this emotional arc? So you're constantly trying to make sure that they're getting a new experience, and you're not just repeating yourself, and you're not just giving them content for the sake of content."

It's not scale for the sake of scale, either. A short RPG can be a great RPG, like *Disco Elysium*, but as Smith points out it's a very different kind of RPG from the ones that Larian makes. "[*Disco Elysium*] is a case. It's

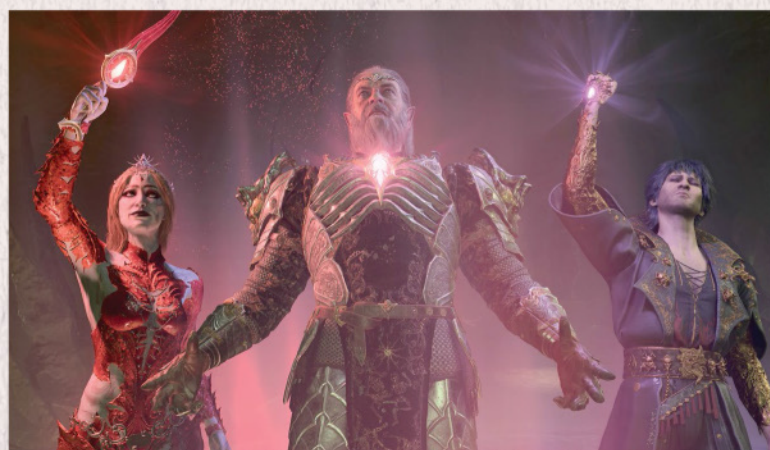
still a journey, but it's much more contained. And it's a very different psychological journey. In a party-based game, especially in a multiplayer party-based game, you need people to be able to go off and do their own thing for a while, discover their own stories."

Even with the massive size of *Baldur's Gate III*, Larian still struggled to find space for all the stories it wanted to tell. It was actually envisioned as larger, initially. Wyll had his own area, the Red War College. Instead of meeting Gortash in *Baldur's Gate*, players would meet him in Candlekeep, where the first *Baldur's Gate* began. There was a Shadow Druids hangout, a gnome village, and a map that could be explored in a non-linear fashion just like the original games. These were cut for a variety of reasons, but one of the key issues was that they were smaller areas, leading to fewer ways for players to be able to express themselves and do their own thing. Larian opted for fewer but larger areas where more things could happen. But that also necessitated finding new homes for some characters and story beats.

On the subject of new homes, is Larian interested in leaving its well-trodden fantasy realms behind? Both Rivellon and the Forgotten Realms share a great deal, and Vincke and Co have been dabbling in this sandbox for decades. "Yes, of course," Vincke says. "There's so many things that I would like to do. Just so little things that you can do. So there's really a lot I would like to do..." And not for the first time during this interview Vincke catches himself about to give too

BELOW LEFT: A triumvirate of incredibly well written, memorable baddies.

BELOW RIGHT: Larian is a master of offering gamers creative and fun gameplay opportunities.



“WE WERE MADE FOR MAKING LARGE, AMBITIOUS RPGS AND TO TRY NEW STUFF”

that is a bad thing to do. What if you have to try and find peaceful solutions?” That’s really interesting, but that happens across the board in RPGs now, so it’s not as interesting a question as it was. So yeah, it’s not a rich world to me.”

Despite this, Vincke isn’t closing the door entirely. “Never say never,” he says. “There’s another developer who I’d love to work with one day in my life and we’d get along really well. I can’t tell you who, but he’s a big *Ultima* fan, so you never know.”

What’s clear, though, is that Vincke and Smith are much more excited to be free to create things that

are uniquely theirs, playing in sandboxes of their own creation without the constraints of a ruleset that somebody else conjured up. And while, yes, as a D&D fan it is a shame to see Larian leave *Baldur’s Gate* behind, it’s thrilling to know that the best RPG developers around are now free to take what they achieved in *Baldur’s Gate III* and push it forward or in other directions without limitations. For the last ten years, Larian’s trajectory has been ‘bigger and better’, so its next adventure could be its most impressive. For now, though, only Larian knows what it’s going to be. ■

much away, and clamps up. He won’t be falling into any of my brilliant traps, it seems.

IP BINGO

While Larian is back doing its own thing, it’s hard not to hope that it will eventually take on another existing property, maybe something that’s been languishing for years. One series Vincke often discusses is *Ultima*, and in many ways the *Divinity* games are love letters to Richard Garriott’s classic RPGs. Indeed, when Vincke was considering properties for Larian to work on, before it got its hands on D&D, *Ultima* was on the list, along with *Fallout*. Broaching the subject now, however, he seems to be mostly over the idea. “That’s Richard Garriott’s thing,” he says.

“I love *Ultima*,” adds Smith, “but I don’t think it needs to come back. The thing about *Ultima* for me was, 4, 5 and 6 I absolutely love, but 7, it might be my favourite game. But I don’t know. Like, would you remake *Ultima 7*? I don’t know what you’d want to do. With *Baldur’s Gate*, there was a world I was interested in. There were characters and there was a story that felt like they could continue, and themes that were very strong. *Ultima*, each game... they’re very independently themed.”

The most interesting component, the thing worth exploring, Smith says, is the virtue system. He’d be interested in going back to the earlier *Ultimas*, “Where it’s like, how do you make an RPG that treats combat as a violent thing that is not good, which is one of Garriott’s original ideas. You make RPGs or games where you hit things on the head and looted them. And he said, ‘Well, what if, actually,



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Bullet heaven

What a pleasant surprise it was to see that *Cygni: All Guns Blazing*, a shmup very much informed by classic bullet hell shoot-'em-ups of old such as *Radiant Silvergun* and *Ikaruga*, has scored well this issue. As our official review shows, this is a great gaming experience that, while offering plenty of hardcore madness for genre aficionados, is also highly accessible to newbies.

While the shmup genre has never been huge on PC, for anyone of a certain age this type of game is very much baked into their gaming DNA. Shoot-'em-ups were a huge pillar in gaming through the '80s and the '90s, so it's great to see modern new takes on the genre being released, and especially so on PC, where their fast-paced gameplay and bombastic technicolour visuals really shine.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

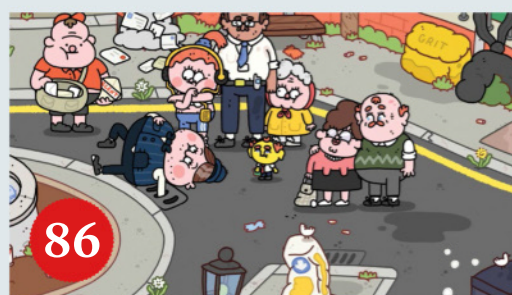
**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's mythological reviewers...



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Monkeying around
Currently playing
Black Myth: Wukong
This month
Showed Tony the Tiger his collection of PC Gamer magazines. He said, "They're grrreat!"



DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
Asset recycling
Currently playing
Earth Defense Force 6
This month
Shot at giant sexy aliens from the roof of PC Gamer Towers.



HARVEY RANDALL
Specialist in
Unhinged ideas
Currently playing
Tactical Breach Wizards
This month
Dressed as Gandalf, kicked in the doors of McDonalds for nuggs.



MATT POSKITT
Specialist in
Being northern
Currently playing
Thank Goodness You're Here!
This month
Sang On Ilkla Moar Baht 'at while handing out homemade parkin.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Doing bollock-all
Currently playing
Red Dead Redemption 2
This month
Spent hours vigorously lubricating his weapon. Oh, and he also oiled his rifle.



84

MONKEY TALE

BLACK MYTH: WUKONG is the most delightful Soulslike

By Tyler Colp

These animals may not have thumbs, but they sure have hands. Tony the Tiger studied the blade just to carve me into a pumpkin lantern and I'm not even mad about it; in fact, I'm impressed. The entire zoo is out for blood in *Black Myth: Wukong* and I'm here for it.

Dark Souls never let me stick my tongue out as a giant frog and slap my enemies around with it. It never let me create a posse of clones to punch an evil pile of rocks back into the ground either. If *Dark Souls* is a trial, *Wukong* is an adventure. Or if you want to be accurate about it, it's a Journey to the West, but the animals have health bars. *Wukong* imagines a version of the classic Chinese story where a fox upgrades your healing potion. If anything about it is truly like FromSoftware's games, it's how much it lets its rich world speak for itself.

Wukong doesn't waste time trying to establish why there's a forest of wolf men or why you're serenaded by a man without a head. It opens with hero Sun Wukong laughing in the face of a council of gods who immediately punish him so hard it takes hundreds of years for him to be reincarnated as a level 1 monkey. Journey to the West isn't required reading before playing *Wukong*, but doing so might make its world

considerably less opaque. Even so, I had no troubles appreciating its eccentric cast of talking animals who are either so amusingly pathetic you pity them or so self-serious it's like you barged in on their third act.

Surprises like a gigantic frog leaping out of tall grass and a serpentine dragon clutching me in its teeth far above a frozen lake lured me forward – every level is a series of bizarre vignettes crash landing into a seemingly

straightforward quest. *Wukong* is overflowing with boss fights, which isn't actually as intimidating as it sounds. The difficulty of these encounters is so uneven that you never know what to expect. You might stumble into an oversized rat and come out unscathed, but need to fully lock-in to defeat a raging bear. Many of the bosses celebrate the spectacle rather than demanding your sharpest reflexes.

A similar ethos applies to the sections between those big fights. *Wukong*'s level design begins

Dark Souls never let me stick my tongue out as a giant frog

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A beautiful and challenging singleplayer action RPG based on Journey to the West

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Game Science

PUBLISHER
Game Science

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-12900K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
heishenhua.com

extremely linear, almost to the point of constricting its combat into one big highway of enemies, but it gradually opens up after the first few hours. You go from bonking wolves in a forest to tiptoeing past skeletal snake men. In its second chapter, every kind of rat shows up to snipe you from rooftops or set you on fire with clouds of gunpowder. *Wukong* gently pressures you to take side paths that lead to treasure or sidequests that will beef you up for what's ahead.

In a desert area, I cleared out some shield-bearing hedgehogs and jumped down a bridge to find a man who had been turned into a rock begging for help. When I returned with an item he asked for he laughed at me for being gullible enough to fall for his trick – a classic 16th-century joke! Suddenly I could lock onto him, so I smacked him a few times and he gave up a spell that let me parry attacks by turning to stone.

Instead of dropping you into a meat grinder of tricky enemy placements between each boss like so many Soulslikes, *Wukong* lets these open sections breathe so you can soak up its world before moving into the next big battle.

When the fights do get tough – and some of them definitely do – *Wukong*'s flexible skill tree and upgrade systems keep most of them from feeling like brick walls. At any shrine, *Wukong*'s version of *Dark Souls*' bonfire checkpoints that respawn nearby enemies, you can move your skill points around to invest in a number of powerful magical abilities. Investing in Immobilize gave me a tool to freeze enemies just before they landed a hit so I could heal or retaliate. Maxing out the duration of a spell that transformed me into a wolf with a flaming polearm was like having a second life for multi-phase bosses. While I wouldn't quite call them builds, *Wukong* has plenty of ways for you to almost nullify the nastiest parts of a fight so you can survive it. »

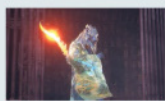
TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Black Myth: Wukong's most satisfying spells



IMMOBILIZE

As soon as you see an incoming attack, a quick shot of this buys you precious time to react.



RED TIDES

Gain a second life by transforming into a wolf capable of devastating burning attacks.



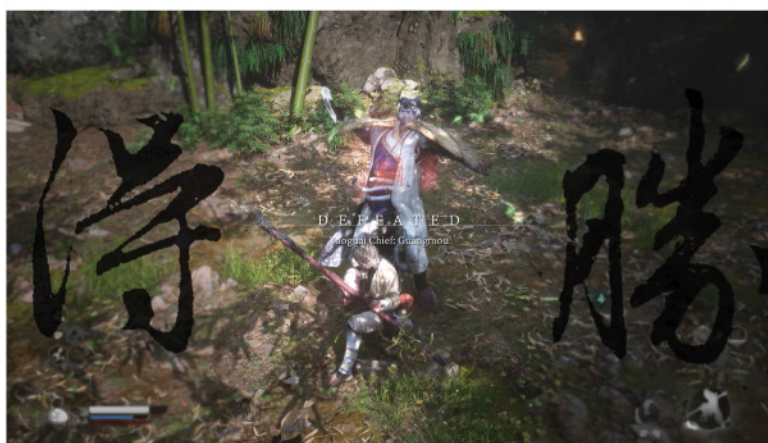
CLOUD STEP

Vanish out of sight and strike for critical damage while the enemy is distracted.



A PLUCK OF MANY

Call in a group of clones to wallop enemies with high health.



FAR LEFT: Boss fights are never so tough that you'll be stuck on one for days.

BELOW: Many characters are ripped straight from the original story.



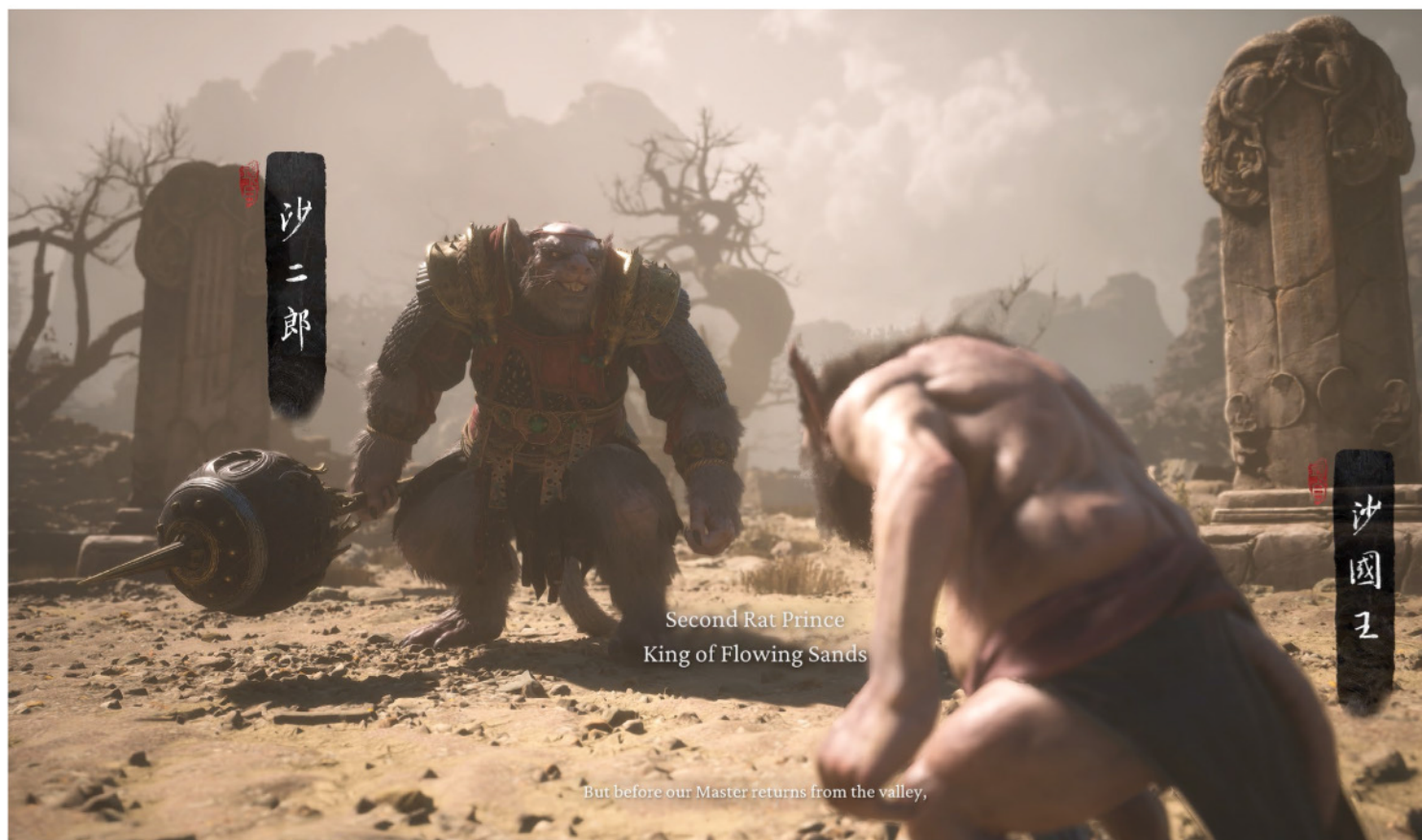
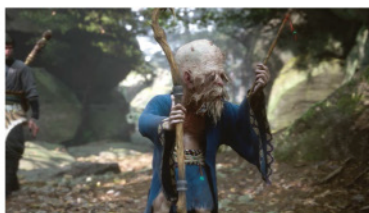
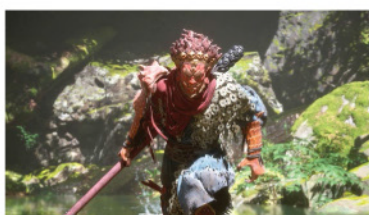


The best battles are a duel against one strong opposing warrior.



FAR RIGHT: Every location has a stunning amount of detail and artistry.

BELOW: Every enemy in the game has a story you can read in your journal.



沙二郎

Second Rat Prince
King of Flowing Sands

沙國王

But before our Master returns from the valley,

Its spells are so strong that I suspect some players will opt to fight without them, like all the Reddit ascetics who proudly refuse to use the mimic tear in *Elden Ring*.

But doing so will rob you of the most satisfying elements of *Wukong*'s combat. Aside from some minor damage upgrades to your staff, you don't have an inventory of weapons to choose from. You do, however, have an inventory of creatures to choose from. Special enemies found throughout the levels drop their spirits which can be equipped for a passive buff and a devastating signature attack, like morphing your head into a giant hammer or turning into a swordsman for one clean slash attack. Combat is largely about creating openings in an enemy's attack patterns with your spells and buying time with dodges until they're back online.

Most fights are a dance of cartwheels, somersaults and puffs of smoke as your monkey man assumes the form of various beasts that you collect like Pokémon. Once you find the rhythm, you go from playing as a warrior to a magician pulling monsters out of a hat.

A ROUGH START

Nothing is more frustrating than when that flow is broken by something you can't improve with a little better timing or prediction. In the review build of the game, a stuttery framerate and occasional crash ended a few battles prematurely for me. *Wukong* is yet

another game plagued by the curse of shaders tanking performance so badly that instead of swapping your skill points you're swapping video settings to find a combination that'll get you through the next section, and no amount of raw GPU grunt can power through it.

Although *Wukong* has fairly linear

Most fights are a dance of cartwheels and puffs of smoke

environments, they're dense with beautiful detail, like a sunbaked desert with gnarled trees or a forest of glowing leaves. It's a shame that I had to muddy any of it by knocking down my settings to medium on a GeForce RTX 4090. It fixed my issues without tarnishing too much of the gorgeous views, but there's a chance the experience could be even worse for people with less extravagant graphics cards.

The handful of deaths from the game's poor performance couldn't sour how impressive *Wukong* is as an action game that isn't content with living in FromSoftware's shadow. It may have a lot of the signifiers of a Soulslike, but it wields its difficulty in a more playful, approachable way. *Wukong* shirks a lot of the punishing difficulty synonymous with the Soulslike genre, positioning it as one of the best games to recommend to anyone who has avoided them or for those who aren't fond of how grim they tend to be. Bosses that bookend each chapter are the closest mirrors to ones you'd find in *Elden Ring*, but you can skip usual moveset memorisation and trial-and-error

with patience, dodging around until you're comfortable with going in. Checkpoints are never more than 30 seconds away from the bosses too. The rewards at the end of each chapter are striking little animations – one of which is a stop-motion parable about a man who saves an injured wolf – that make your effort worth it.

Those scenes reinforce the exuberance with which the game's developers drew from such an iconic work of folklore. Game Science has imbued *Wukong* with a staggering amount of creativity. Aside from performance issues, the biggest disappointment comes from outside the game itself: last year, an IGN report described in detail a history of sexist remarks from Game Science's leaders. The studio has declined to acknowledge the allegations in recent interviews, and while I didn't find anything within the game that reflects an extremely regressive view of women, the behaviour tarnishes what would otherwise be an effortless recommendation.

Wukong is one of the most joyful action RPGs I've played simply for how lovingly it treats its world and characters and, by extension, how much it clearly wants me to love them too. It works: punchy combat aside, I wanted to keep working through each area to meet another weird little creature or to get jumped by another animal who's learned MMA. In a pool of games about fallen kings and sad dragons, it's delightful to play an action game that isn't obsessed with being dour and where the best solution to the most gruelling fights is to use as many fun abilities as you can. In a year with the tremendous *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree* DLC, I never thought I'd play a game that veers in such a wildly different direction but reaches similar highs, even if it lacks the scale and build complexity of FromSoftware's masterpiece.

Wukong is its own beast and, if it has to be labelled a Soulslike, then I think we're going to have to come up with a new definition. There's nothing else quite like it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Black Myth: Wukong is a journey blossoming with an eccentric cast of characters and expressive combat.

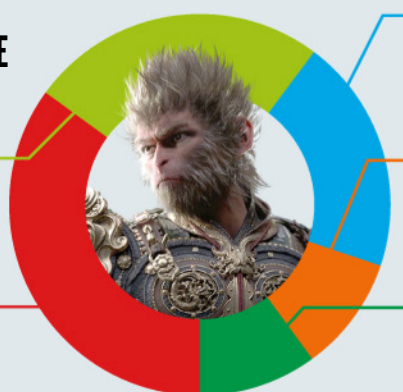
87

HOW SOULSLIKE IS IT?

25% SATISFYING COMBAT

Swapping between swift attacks and powerful magic.

35% RICH WORLDBUILDING
There are tons of references and nods to the source material.



20% WEIRD NPCs
There are all kinds of strange animals to speak to.

10% BRUTAL BOSSES
Few bosses are impossibly tough to beat.

10% BUILD DIVERSITY
Gear and skill points don't impact combat that much.

STARSHIP BLOOPERS

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 6 elevates B-movie action with a smart time-travel twist

By Dominic Tarason

Earth Defense Force 6 is one of the most joyful shooters I've played in years, delivering mega-scale slapstick gunfights like nothing else while walking a tightrope-fine line between genius and idiocy in its design. It's also a janky, rough-hewn piece of software with a mediocre PC port and egregious recycling of assets.

The original PS2 *EDF* was a simple third-person retro B-movie shooter about a little soldier guy fighting oversized alien ants and wobbly UFOs using skyscraper-flattening guns that could send your own ragdoll body flying if you got caught in your own blast.

That core remains unchanged, although *EDF* now has four classes of soldiers, online co-op and more enemy variety. The joy of being a little guy fighting hordes that blot out the sky remains unchanged, and is only amplified when the game gives you a lumbering Pacific Rim-esque mech to punch out some skyscraper-sized kaiju.

EDF is pure meathead gaming. You shoot giant aliens, pick up the red and green boxes they drop, and

you repeat, alone or with one to three friends. Easy to pick up, but with tactical nuance, each enemy type and battlefield demanding a different approach and experimenting with hundreds of stockpiled guns.

Whether you're skeet-shooting UFOs or thinning out a hundred

giant wasps with artillery, there's just enough tactical depth to keep the action consistently engaging, especially in co-op where the class-based nature of a squad shines brightest.

EDF 6 is

fundamentally the same game as 2017's *EDF 5*. That age means it runs decently on systems as modest as the Steam Deck. It won't be winning any graphical awards, but it makes up for that with gaming's biggest gunfights and some of the best explosions,

There's just enough tactical depth to keep the action engaging

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A big, silly class-based B-movie co-op shooter on an enormous scale

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

Sandlot

PUBLISHER

D3publisher

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 5800H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER

Online 4-player co-op, 2 players split-screen

LINK

d3p.co.jp/edf6

lighting up the terrain for miles. *EDF 6* also features most of the same assets and moment-to-moment action as its predecessor. And yet despite being the longest in the series, it somehow feels less repetitive this time thanks to the power of narrative context. Weird to say about an *EDF* game, but bear with me.

DO THE TIME WARP AGAIN

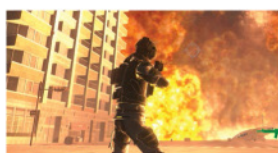
EDF 6 picks after *EDF 5*'s pyrrhic victory against the giant shiny alien god-emperor. After a few warm-up missions, the invaders play their trump card: time travel. One time-portal later and you're stuck in an even more doomed timeline where humans are being hunted by wobbly giant robots – a whole new threat. So it's off to the past to break the aliens' new toys.

And that's the trick. The budget-saving re-use works as it's all framed as a game of temporal one-upmanship. The aliens send some new threat to the past, and you kick its ass across an abridged version of *EDF 5*'s campaign remixed with new twists. Before it can outstay its welcome, everything resets and the NPC battle chatter grows



ABOVE: Bouncing, reflective lasers find their niche in underground maps.





TOP: Aiming is also sometimes optional. Shoot, and you will hit.

FAR RIGHT: If it bleeds, you can kill it. And some bleed a LOT.

increasingly amazed at your impossible alien-slaying skills.

It works in perfect harmony with *EDF*'s progression loop, as you grow more resilient and your arsenal ever-larger. The new enemies keep things fresh, robots swarming like ants but having trickier hitboxes (thanks to their wire-thin limbs) throwing rocket-punches from awkward angles and heights. Ten-metre-tall octopoid soldiers join in, wielding two guns and two energy shields at once, their physics-driven limbs and hyper-reactive bullet-blocking AI making them feel properly alien.

EDF 6 avoids its predecessor's grind through overly similar missions. Each time loop feels like a fresh escalation, resetting the scale of battles, introducing new threats and building to a spectacular climax each time. It ends up feeling less like a regular *EDF* sequel and more like four or five smaller ones played back-to-back.

The time travel angle means new players may not fully appreciate some of the story beats and twists, but the refined campaign structure makes this the best entry to the series yet. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

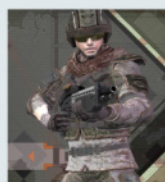
Sandlot's Earth Defense Force 6 is big, dumb co-op fun and a masterclass in the recycling of assets.

82



CLASS ACT

EDF 6's oddball classes, summarised



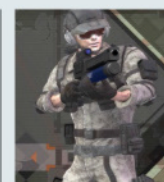
RANGER

Simplest and best for solo play. New in *EDF 6* is a quick-slot for grenades, deployable turrets or passive stat boosts.



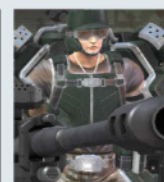
WING DIVER

The glass cannon, with half the health of the Ranger and constantly juggling an overhear-prone reactor's output.



AIR RAIDER

This quirky 'support' class shines in co-op, calling in vehicle drops, airstrikes, healing towers and inflatable decoys.



FENCER

The Fencer is the most technical of them all, playing less like a regular shooter and more like a mech game.

I CAST GUN

TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS is spellbindingly spectacular – I just want more of it

By Harvey Randall

There's a phenomenon observed among most tabletop roleplaying (TTRPG) groups: As you play together, falling into each other's rhythms, two things start to happen. Firstly, your capability for sincere storytelling reaches new heights; secondly, your ideas grow increasingly unhinged.

Tactical Breach Wizards, a turn-based tactics game by Suspicious Developments Inc, captures the essence of a seasoned TTRPG group and distils it into around 18 hours of absolute malarkey, heartstring-pulling character stories, and yes – defenestration.

Tactical Breach Wizards is far from XCOM in a robe and wizard hat. Instead of long-term battles, it zeroes in on the 'breach, clear, repeat' loop of bite-sized combat puzzles, and gives you more tactical tools than you could fit inside a bag of holding, with a ton of different ways to wield them. It's what's scribbled in between the margins, though – the story, the characters, and the stream of top-tier party banter – that really makes *Tactical Breach Wizards* soar.

Tactical Breach Wizards is not a game that's entirely interested in consequences – instead, it's invested

in making you feel like the biggest genius this side of the Bay of Teeth. Living with your mistakes is for people without magic, after all. Owing to navy seer Zan Vesker, (a man who occasionally does a prophecy, but can mostly see just

one second into the future) your actions in *Tactical Breach Wizards* can always be reset, as long as you don't click the end turn button.

Missions are split up into three phases: the action phase, the foresee phase, and your enemy's turn. In the action phase, you plan out how your team's going to react. In the foresee phase, you watch how that all pays off, and during the enemy's turn, they get to move their pawns around, giving you a new set of circumstances to puzzle your way through.

Playing on the game's intended difficulty, I never found any of its challenges insurmountable – what

The kind of drip that would make the grim reaper envious

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Turn-based tactical combat with a great story

EXPECT TO PAY

£16.75

DEVELOPER
Suspicious Developments Inc

PUBLISHER
Suspicious Developments

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
suspiciousdevelopments.com

teased my brain, however, were its optional in-mission challenges. These can be anything from defenestrating Steve Clark, traffic warlock, to dealing with all enemies by turn two.

You can replay these missions to tackle the extra bits later, and they're not mandatory, but there's a good reason to complete them as soon as you can: fashion. Completing challenges earns you Confidence, which lets you unlock outfits for your squad – severe necromancer Banks had some of my favourite outfits, including a Wild West gunslinger look, two hoodies, and the kind of drip that would make the grim reaper envious. Nailing these optional objectives is imminently satisfying, too, and is owed to the sheer flexibility you have to piece together some buck-wild combos.

POWER WORD: WOMBO

Each character in *Tactical Breach Wizards* is brilliantly put together, fulfilling a niche that synergises with their compatriots in various ways. As you unlock more perks, you go from barely being able to knock three guys out of a window to an unstoppable breaching machine.

For example, Vesker the navy seer and Banks the necromedic (she can revive people, but they have to be dead first) work nicely together. Vesker can use False Prophet, which summons a clone that (with all his perks unlocked) fires its assault staff at an enemy whenever anyone, including other clones, hits them with a basic attack – and while each clone only gets one potshot off per triggering strike, they trigger off each other, leading to a volley of gunfire that melts just about anything.

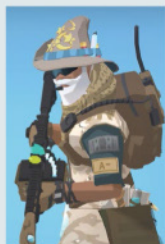
Once they've earned their keep, Banks swoops in with her 3x3 attack (upgraded with a perk to increase its instant damage) and deftly kills them. This is a very smart strategy and not a horrible betrayal of your clone buddies because of a perk that refunds their mana cost as long as

MEET THE CREW

Four out of five wizards kick serious butt



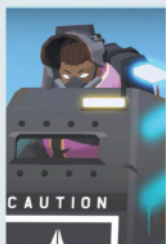
JEN KELLEN
Private investigator, needs a case like you need oxygen.



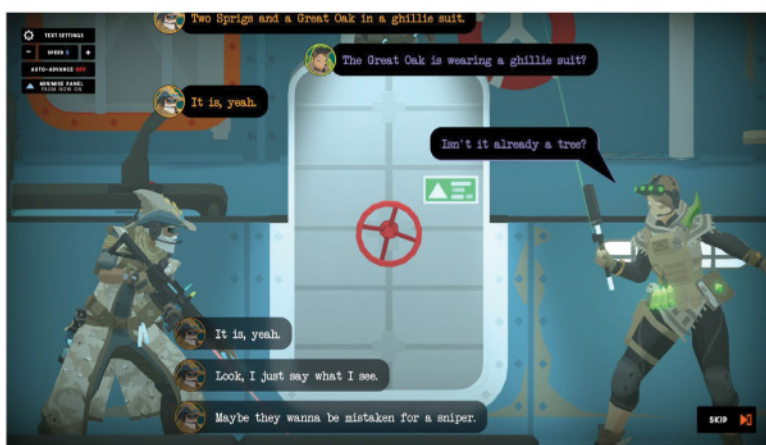
ZAN VESKER
Ex-navy seer, blessed with the power of foresight (anxiety).



DESSA BANKS
Necromedic, no-nonsense, prognosis: gun.



DALL SABIN
Rebel riot cleric, hits things very hard, keeps the faith.



FAR LEFT: The game's best story moments are often tucked away in its optional 'chat' cutscenes.

LEFT: Introducing Jen Kellen: private investigator, witch, and Steve Clark's biggest hater.

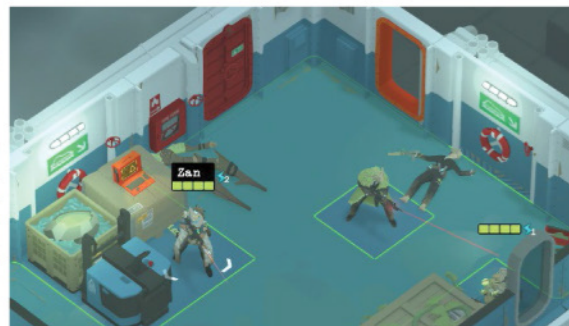
BELOW: What's a little corporate assassination between friends?



EVENT LOG 1

FORESEE
1 ACTION

END
TURN



they die before the end of the turn, allowing Vesker to summon a fresh batch of helpers next round.

Storm witch Jen Kellen and riot priest Dall Sabin also make great partners. Jen has a chain lightning attack that knocks people around based on its angle of entry, strewn between three (and eventually six) targets. This can link to enemies, allies, and objects – including Dall's riot block, which she can throw down just about anywhere. Dall can also swap herself with allies and enemies. Essentially, this means Dall can manipulate enemy positioning to make the best use out of Jen's chain lightning, punting enemies out of windows or into objects for massive colliding damage. Simple tools that make you feel like a Harvard graduate when you get a triple kill with one well-angled bolt.

Usually, turn-based tactical games irritate me because they have specific solutions to any one situation – and while *Tactical Breach Wizards* does have the occasional puzzle box level, it has just as many stages which saturate the field with foes and let you figure out your own solution.

My only real complaint is that, while you can replay older missions with your full kit, the game feels like it's missing a NG+ option, bar ratcheting up the difficulty and going through every mission one by one again. There are some post-game challenges, but I swept through them in a handful of hours without trouble.

By the time you've got access to six maxed-out agents, you're pulling off absolute nonsense every single turn. It gets to the point where it feels a smidge unfair. I played the

game on its normal difficulty, though I did try some of its endgame missions on hard with a maxed-out crew – and while I certainly had to get more inventive, I wasn't sweating too much, especially with the pressure of completing its optional confidence goals taken off.

Mind, the game's being

released with both a comprehensive level editor and the ability to share them with other players – so who knows, some wunderkinds might assemble the endgame nightmare I've been craving. The saving

grace of the game's slightly-undercooked replayability (which is only a problem because I want more of it) is its story, which completely caught me off guard.

Simple tools that make you feel like a Harvard graduate

FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC

Tactical Breach Wizards is a very funny game. Characters quip with each other in snappy, well-written ways that send up the absurdity of its setting tremendously. For example, in the very first mission, both characters take a moment to puzzle over a druid mafia Great Oak in a ghillie suit. "Isn't it already a tree?" your companion asks, to which you can reply, "Maybe they wanna be mistaken for a sniper."

Few opportunities are wasted for a good gag. Every mission complete screen comes with a joke objective that usually pulled a cackle out of me. And while that might sound exhausting on the face of it, *Tactical Breach Wizards* breaks up its comedy with bouts of great character writing.

It presents itself as a high-octane action military romp with its tongue firmly lodged in its cheek – and it

absolutely is that. But it's also unfailingly sincere, with character development that somehow manages to be great despite the limited time allocated to such things in your average tactics game.

The story is told via pre- and post-mission cutscenes, but it's also delivered in quick conversations before every door breach, Anxiety Dream missions that delve into a character's specific psyche to unlock high-powered perks, and a cute little corkboard map that helps you literally string things together.

One-on-one conversations between your party members, meanwhile, flesh them out. Every character gets to be explored, with attention devoted to their personal shtick, insecurities and tragedies – elevating what would otherwise be a very competent action flick into something memorable.

PLAYING IT STRAIGHT

The one word I keep coming back to when thinking about my time with this game is sincerity. *Tactical Breach Wizards* is a well-designed turn-based tactics game, but it's executed with both an earnestness and enthusiasm that's hard to ignore.

Its mechanics are well balanced, but will always drop balance in favour of letting you pull off dumb and cool manoeuvres. It's a game that trades in nonsense and irreverence while managing to be thoughtful, and my 22 hours with it – which include completing all goals and dream levels – were spent spellbound.

If the worst I can say is that I simply want more of *Tactical Breach Wizards*, that's a sign we've got something special on our hands. If you like tactics games and character-driven stories, the only crime this game commits is leaving you hungry for more of both.

Disclosure: *Tactical Breach Wizards*' developer Tom Francis was an editor at PC Gamer for ten years, leaving in 2013 after the release of his first game, *Gunpoint*. We assign writers and editors who do not have personal relationships with Tom to any coverage of his games. ■

ANATOMY OF A TURN

Guns to the fore(sight)



PLAN

Suss out what you're going to do – you can rewind all the way back to the first action.



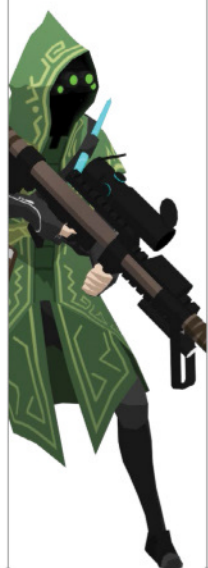
FORSEE

Check whether you get your face shot off, or not. You can still rewind here.



CONFIRM

Lock in your choices, and prepare to deal with reinforcements.



PC GAMER VERDICT

Tactical Breach Wizards is an excellent turn-based tactical combat wrapped up in a joyful, tightly-written story.

88

STEAMWORK

STEAMWORLD HEIST 2 is the most ambitious SteamWorld game yet

By Robin Valentine

This strategy sequel's biggest new innovation is that its robot protagonists can now switch freely between different battlefield jobs, and combine abilities unlocked in each together. Though there are only six roles, there's an impressive depth to the amount of different possible combinations. That's emblematic of a sequel that expands on its predecessor in almost every way.

The original *SteamWorld Heist* was the most impressive of the bunch – a turn-based tactical RPG, its clever twist was manual aiming and ricocheting bullets, allowing you to pull off wild trick

shots. *Heist 2* takes that great core combat and expands out everything around it, adding an overworld to explore, more progression and equipment for your crew, a more elaborate story and a lot more fights to blast your way through.

You play as Leeway Krakenbane, a downtrodden pirate struggling to make a name for himself. Gathering together a motley crew, he sets out to discover the source of the Rust, a mysterious force corrupting water.

Your journey across the world itself – which is basically the 1700s Caribbean but with steampunk robots instead of humans – plays like a sort of very lightweight *Metroidvania*. Piloting a little submarine, you can search for loot and secrets, battle enemy ships, and earn abilities that allow you to access new areas, such as being able to smash through rock barriers or submerge into deeper water.

To be honest, though, none of this exploration is especially fun, mostly just feeling like filler. The missions, scattered around the map, are the real meat of the game. Each is its own combat scenario, usually focused on stealing important loot as fast as possible before blasting your way to an extraction point while the ever-escalating alarm threatens to overwhelm you with summoned reinforcements.

NERVES OF STEEL

Fights are tense and engaging, always feeling on the cusp of spinning out of control, while giving you ample opportunity to show off with flashy combinations of abilities. The manual aiming adds a wonderful layer of uncertainty – you can set up the most perfect turn possible, only for a stray shot to make your plans go suddenly awry.

That might sound annoying, but the game is forgiving enough that adapting to disaster is fun and satisfying rather than

The game is forgiving enough that adapting to disaster is fun

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based strategy RPG where you can shoot people's hats off and steal them

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

Thunderful Development

PUBLISHER

Thunderful Publishing

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

steamworldgames.com

frustrating. And, of course, it can always go the other way – sometimes you pull off a seemingly impossible trickshot, ricocheting a bullet into the back of an enemy's head for a miraculous win.

Tactical use of the jobs system helps you stack the odds in your favour, too. Bots switch role based on their weapon – equip a shotgun and you become a Flanker, for example, while a rocket launcher would make you a Boomer. Whatever job a crew member is currently playing as, they can use all its abilities, but they can also spend cogs to activate abilities they've unlocked in other jobs. It's a simple but surprisingly permissive system, and there are plenty of unexpected combinations to discover.

Building your perfect team is a long process, but then this isn't a short adventure. The game is easily 30 hours long, more if you grind for job levels and gear. That may not seem enormous, but it's more than twice as much as any previous *SteamWorld* game, and its forgettable story and uneven pacing make it feel more of a slog than it should in its latter half.

Normally I do applaud ambition, but in the case of *SteamWorld*, it feels like restraint has always been part of the series' USP. It's not a dealbreaker – *Heist 2*'s combat and progression are brilliantly evolved from the previous game and make for a really sharp yet accessible strategy experience, and those looking for maximum value may well applaud a more substantial offering. But for me it's hard to shake the feeling that this still impressive machine would have run even more smoothly with a few less bells and whistles. ■

FUNEMPLOYED

The six jobs bots can take on



BOOMER

Weapon: Rocket launcher
An explosives expert.



BRAWLER

Weapon: Sledgehammer
Brutal in melee but limited at range.



SNIPER

Weapon: Sniper rifle
Extreme range, but has to reload after every shot.



FLANKER

Weapon: Shotgun
Fast and deadly at short range.



REAPER

Weapon: SMG
Fires again if the first shot kills.



ENGINEER

Weapon: Handgun
Fires twice and can protect and heal.

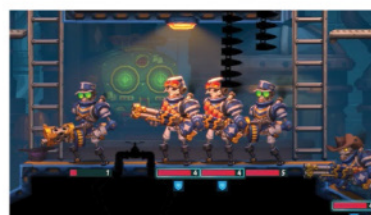
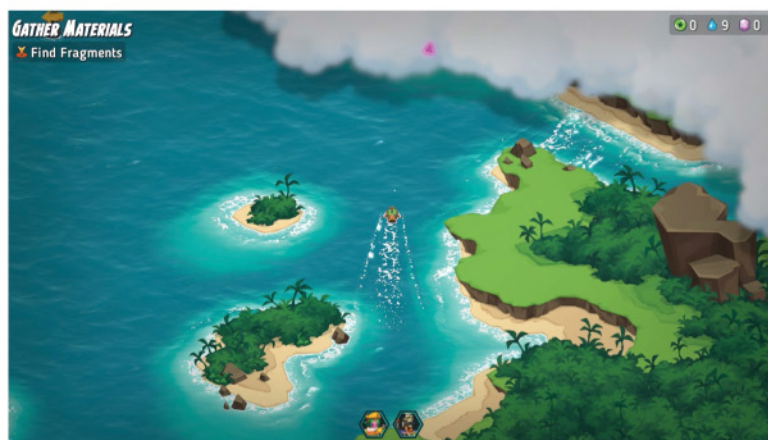
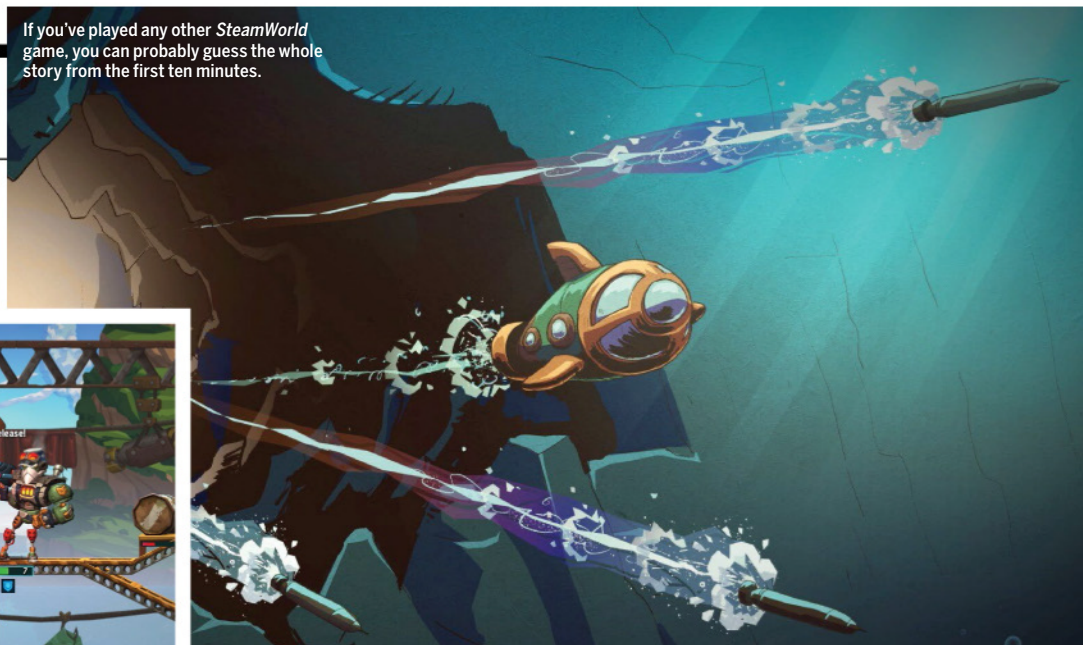
PC GAMER

VERDICT

SteamWorld Heist 2 employs some sharp strategy with a clever new progression system, if a bit overlong.

81

If you've played any other *SteamWorld* game, you can probably guess the whole story from the first ten minutes.



FAR LEFT: Your submarine controls like a wonky shopping trolley, which makes exploration and ship battles a pain.

BELOW: Bosses up the ante with strange special abilities.



STICKY BUSINESS

WORLD OF GOO 2 is definitely goo-d enough for two

By Kerry Brunskill

It's been 16 years since *World of Goo* squidged its way into our hearts, the much loved physics-based puzzle game that became one of indie gaming's earliest and biggest successes. But a lot has changed since then. Polished games from unfamiliar studios aren't some headline-grabbing curiosity anymore, they're absolutely everywhere, all the time. Who needs more *World of Goo*, considering the original was very much done and dusted years ago? Me. I do. We all do, really.

Playing this game is a lot like catching up with an old friend. Everything from the artistic stage-select design to more than a few goo types, environmental hazards, and puzzle pieces, look and behave just as they did before. Even the little time rewinding bugs have returned (thank goodness), making it easy to try again, even if it looked like I'd made a careless stage ruining mistake just before the end. Within moments it was as if not only had the game never been away, but I'd never stopped playing it either.

And because of that, clearing the first few challenges wasn't just easy – it almost felt instinctive. There I was, watching towers of goo dangerously sway as I grabbed and built and stretched an increasingly wobbly mass towards the exit pipe that would suck it all up and end the level, same as last time. Just like the ancient past of 2008, sometimes I needed to hook balloons onto a mass of goo to roll in a particular direction. There were a lot of obviously recycled ideas in here. Good.

These old favourites don't exist in an innovation-free vacuum, but are thoroughly mixed in with high-speed train rides, little boating expeditions, tense journeys through the dark, and even a spot of goo-themed golf. So whenever an old concept did make a comeback it felt like the welcome return of a good idea. *World of Goo 2* wasn't rehashing old favourites because it was out of ideas, it just wanted to show me a good time, and

probably offer a few amusing cutscenes filled with pointed comments on corporate greenwashing along the way.

Clearing the first challenges wasn't just easy – it felt instinctive

GOO[D] TIMING

This good time was always on my own terms and at my own pace too. The goo is as pleasantly tactile as ever, a fun substance to play with no matter how well (or

otherwise) I was doing. Tough challenges for each stage were always available, and entirely optional. It was up to me if I

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A physics-based puzzle game with a delicious gooey centre

EXPECT TO PAY
£23.80

DEVELOPER
2D BOY

PUBLISHER
Tomorrow Corporation

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
worldofgoo2.com

ignored them completely, came back to some of them later on, or refused to move on until I'd cleared them all in a single run.

I didn't even have to clear most of the stages at all unless I wanted to, the vast majority of levels only a couple of clicks away from being skipped without judgement. Maybe I didn't fancy this puzzle right now. Maybe I just want to open everything up right away. Being able to mostly choose what I played and when helped to smooth the frustration and restarts that can come with something as potentially woolly and unpredictable as a physics-based puzzler.

Unfortunately I couldn't ever escape the odd background colour choices used for many areas. Lots of places used a light hazy wash of something nonspecific as their backdrop, which meant the helpful white lines used to indicate exactly how the floating ball of goo I was trying to connect to a nearby mass were often hard to make out. At times this was a challenge run-ending issue, and something that surely should've been picked up on before I got anywhere near the game.

But this was honestly the worst thing I found on *World of Goo 2*, and even when it did cause me problems I was generally having too much fun with the rest of it to really mind the odd stumble. It's a fun, clever, and surprising game that celebrates all the goo that came before, all the goo here now, and even offers a cheeky glimpse at all the goo yet to come. I didn't just have a good time playing it, I finished it feeling pretty confident that the developers had a good time making it too. It's so goo[d] to be back. ■

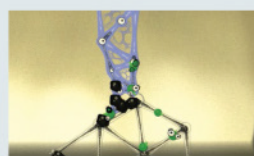
NEW GAME, GOO THIS?

Some new tricks for an old world



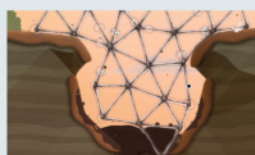
EXPAND

Get this goo wet and it'll grow larger, helping raise goo up – or force it through tiny gaps.



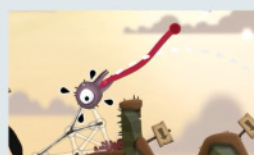
CONTRACT

This goo does the opposite, shrinking when wet like skinny jeans in a hot wash.



SLURP

And how exactly do you get goo wet anyway? By slurping it up through a lattice of goo-straws.



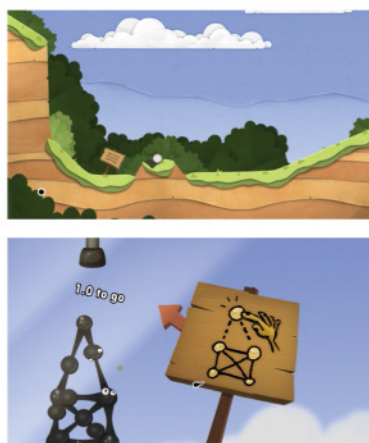
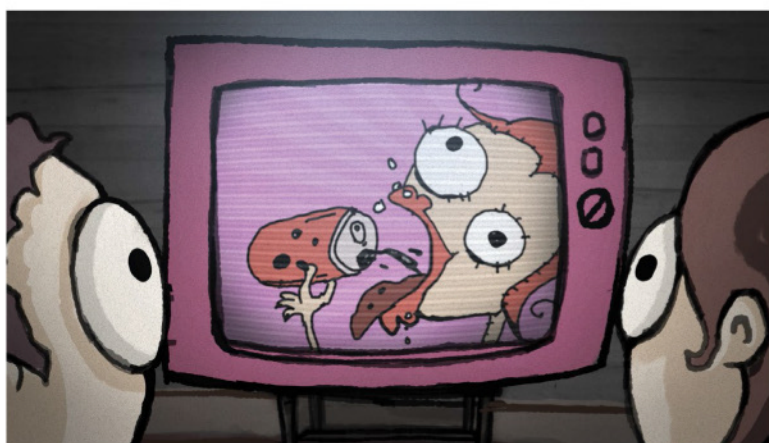
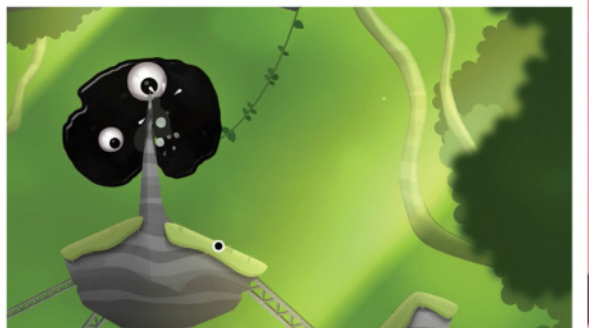
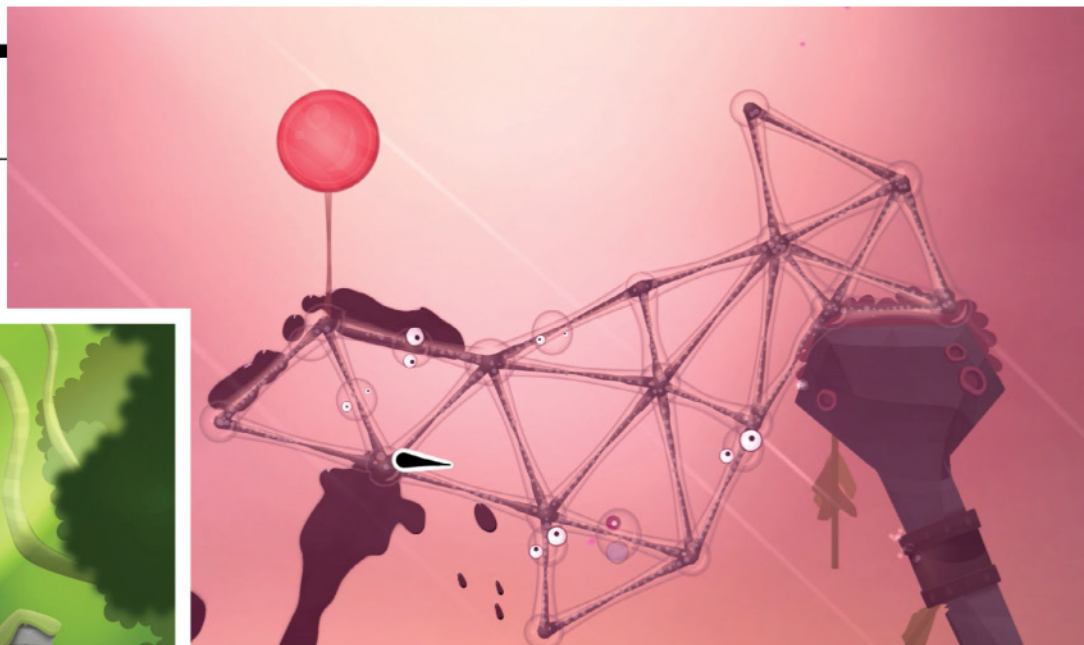
TURRET

Need to goo somewhere in a hurry? Then fire away and you'll be there soon enough.

PC GAMER VERDICT

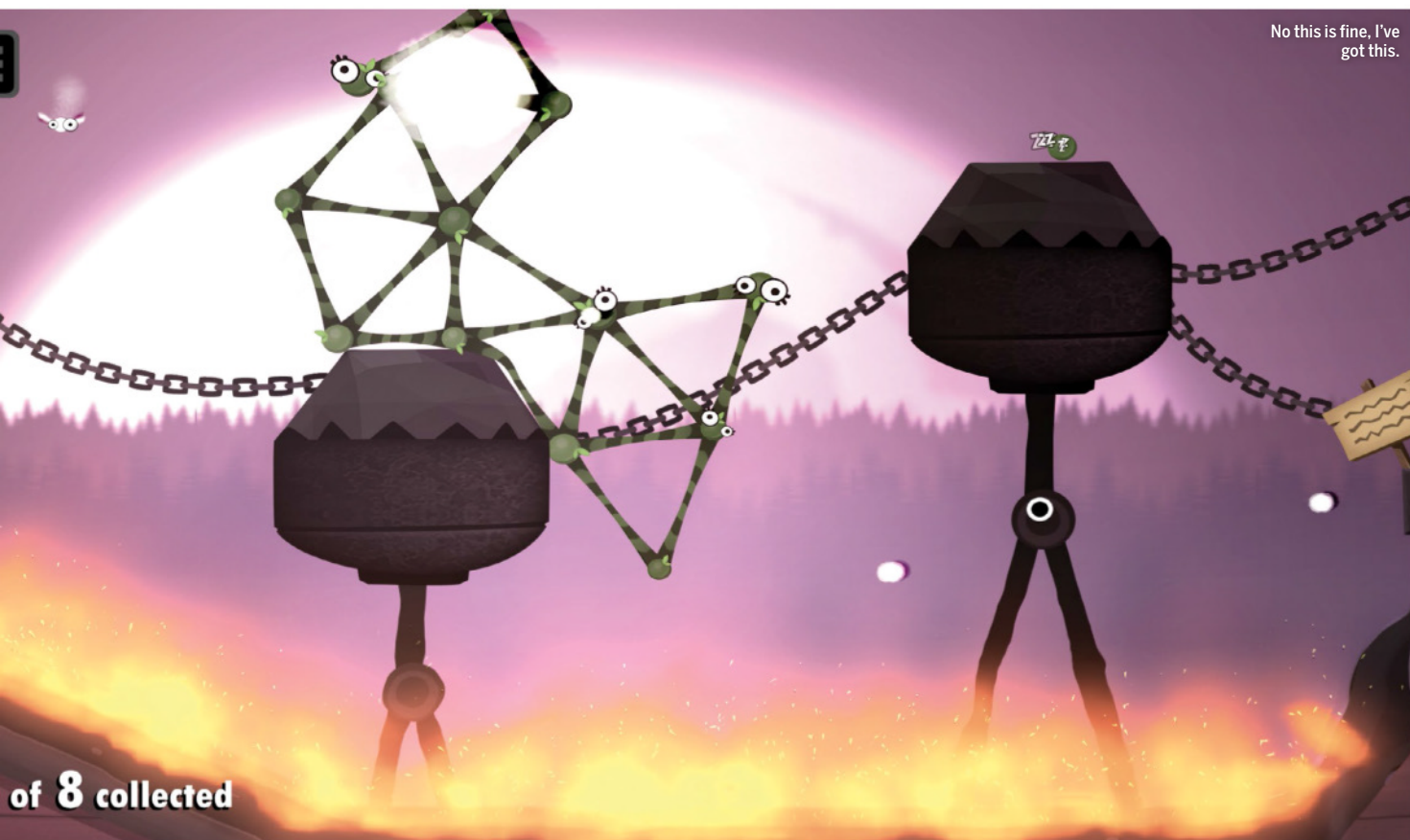
Familiar and inventive, tough yet easygoing, *World of Goo 2* from 2D BOY is a whole world of fun.

84



ABOVE: Soft pastel shades can help soothe a puzzle-battered soul.

FAR LEFT: Surreal cutscenes offer a glimpse of Goo's wider dystopian world.



No this is fine, I've got this.

of 8 collected

BULLET HECK

CYJNI: ALL GUNS BLAZING is an accessible shoot-'em-up with some clever twists

By Justin Wagner

The average level in *Cygni: All Guns Blazing* is about 15 minutes long, give or take, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels like a two-and-a-half hour special effects showcase that ought to have ended with a fade to black and 'Directed by Michael Bay' in big, bold letters. *Cygni*'s audio-visual bombast is difficult to overstate, with its Unreal Engine 4-powered hordes of alien jet fighters screaming toward you from above and below.

After just a couple hours of playing, I felt like my senses had been jackhammered to sludge – and it was intoxicating. Don't get me wrong, I love my pixel art, but dodging incoming trains, taking potshots at a flying space whale and blowing apart sleek alien tanks is riotous when it looks and feels this good. It runs like a dream, too, aside from some frame drops in the especially chaotic final level.

Its shoot-'em-up antics will be quite familiar to any fans of *Ikaruga* or *Radiant Silvergun*. All the bedlam of bullet hell is on offer, but its pace is more palatable for those who don't infuse their tap water with Red Bull. The most dangerous enemy in *Cygni* is also my aforementioned favourite thing about it: visual chaos.

Where a genre classic might prize clarity and clean, obvious visual cues, *Cygni* is eager to drown the player in heaps of enemies from every angle. But while it's easy to miss a few shots and get lost in the tapestry of grinding metal and neon lights, it's forgiving enough that it never feels inescapable.

You can even design custom firing patterns for your main air-to-air gun

SHIELDS UP

Each level starts you off with enough shields to take five hits before a game over, but certain enemies drop extra shields when they die.

You can also reroute shield power to your guns, trading a hit point for extra damage and spending that power outright for rockets, which can hit enemies to your flanks and rear.

You can always trade that damage back for those hit points, but don't do

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Xevious*-style shoot-'em-up, and a suitable on-ramp to the bullet hell

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Keelworks

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1248080/CYJNI_All_Guns_Blazing

it in time and you're toast – it adds a delightful pinch of high-stakes strategy where I just expected undiluted, twitchy action. It gives me the sort of blazing adrenaline rush I assume my dog experiences when I shake a bag of treats.

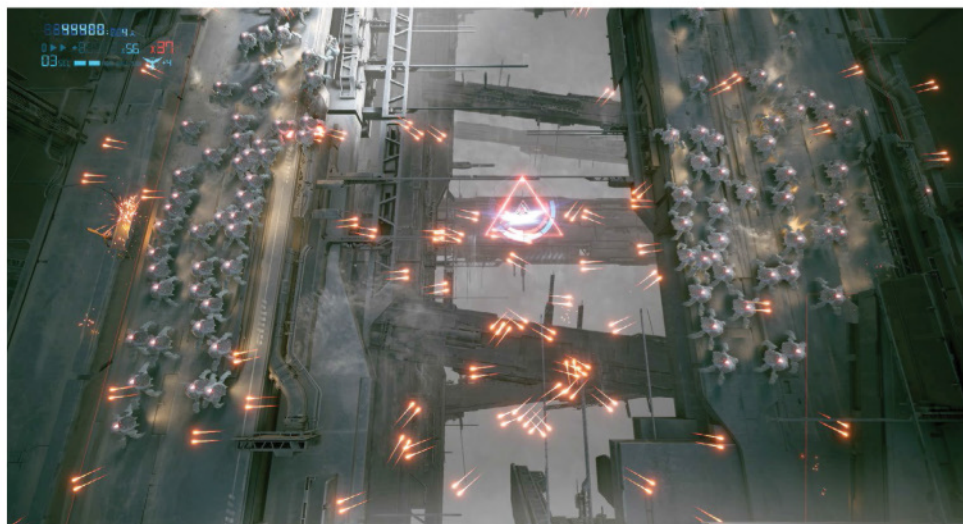
Cygni is quite generous with these pickups, and admittedly, the wealth of shields littered about trivialises certain sections. While the game is at its best when you have just enough shields to make some decisions with them, it doesn't strike this balance perfectly. Maybe this is its way of providing a breather, but these moments don't hit the same on repeated playthroughs.

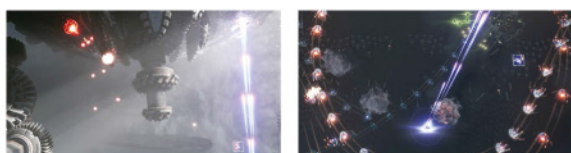
There's also ground warfare (like *Xevious*, but a lot busier) carrying on below the dogfights. Both your air and ground weapons can home in on targets for less damage or be free-aimed for full damage; another gold nugget of risk-reward that pays huge dividends for multitaskers.

All these extra hit points and homing weapons mean *Cygni* is a little gentler than some of the old-school greats, but I loved how it always seemed to egg-on daredevil behaviour. Despite the torrential



ABOVE: Enemy weak spots are often hidden in the nooks and crannies.





TOP: You can use the pattern designer to try novel attack strategies, or trust in the mighty big straight line.

ABOVE: The tactical applications of the 'spiral pattern bullet machine' are still in the R&D phase.

downpour of enemy fire, I never felt like I was hunting for the magic pixel where a particular bullet pattern would never hit me; on the contrary, I was immersed in every dogfight.

The only major waste of potential I found in *Cygni* is with its story, which feels odd to say about a shmup. The game's lore library and cutscenes are sound enough, but there's not much of interest to dig into – a dispensable bit of context the game doesn't benefit from.

Regardless, *Cygni* left me itching for more of its moment-to-moment play. It's lean with only seven levels, but there's additional postgame tinkering in various equippable upgrades and weapons for your ship. You can even design custom firing patterns for your main air-to-air gun, which is sure to stimulate the imaginations of anyone looking to achieve optimisation.

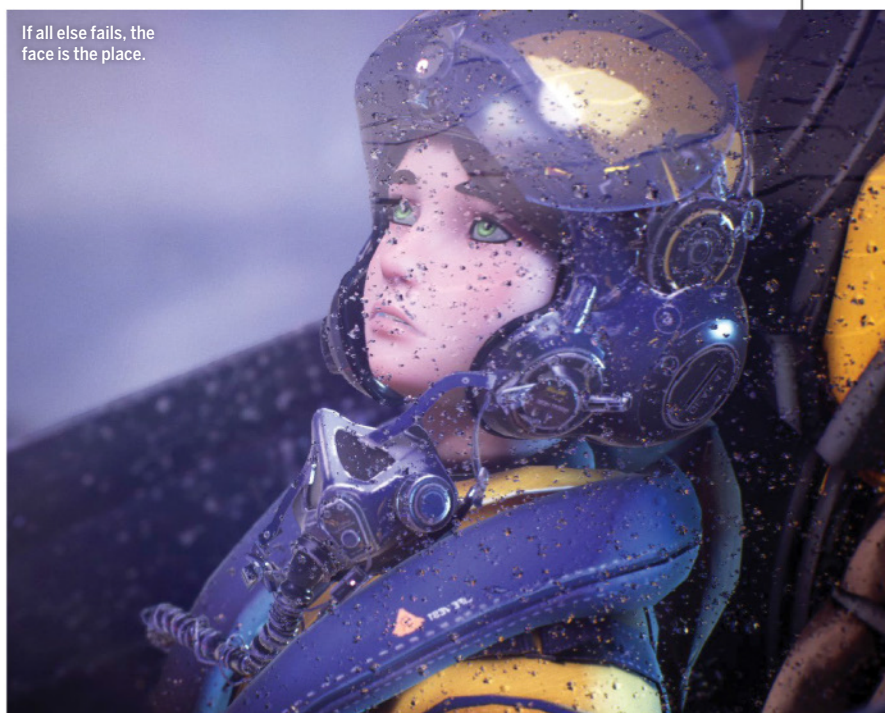
This all culminates in a gorgeous game that offers all the exhilaration of a great bullet hell shooter, but offers the player some unique tools to make improving easier. And as soon as it was over I was headed straight back to arcade mode for another round. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Cygni: All Guns Blazing is a rollicking bullet hell-inspired blockbuster that never takes its foot off the gas.

81

If all else fails, the face is the place.

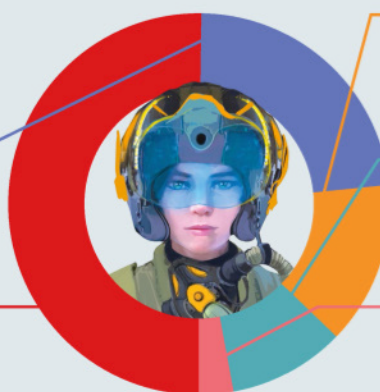


STUNNER GUNNER

A great Orca

22% Designing optimal bullet patterns for better boss times.

50% Converting all shield power to extra rockets.



15% Practising the final level for arcade mode.

10% Remembering to use all those extra rockets.

3% Dying on the final level in arcade mode. Again.

REET GOOD TIME

THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE is a riotous recreation of Yorkshire

By Matt Poskitt

It's hard to remember a game where I've laughed so much in such a short space of time. Not just a few titters here and there, but proper belly laughs. "Marge! Come on, hurry up! I'm eating for two here... and I'm pregnant!" yells one crazed lady waiting at the chippy. This is *Thank Goodness You're Here*, an indie puzzler with platforming elements that sees a travelling salesman visit the fictional town of Barnsworth only to be given increasingly odd jobs.

Born and bred in Yorkshire, I've been besotted by the idea of a game that is not only set in the region but leans hard into its humorous roots. It seems *Thank Goodness You're Here* has been worth the wait with developer Coal Supper being able to push stereotypical tropes into surrealist slapstick territory to create a treasure trove of bizarre and interesting characters to fill this town.

Upon booting it up, a dolly zoom shot of a real-life post-industrial Northern street is presented while The Marrow Song (Oh! What a Beauty!) performed by Joey Kaye is sung cheekily in the backdrop. A striking difference from any modern triple-A introduction. You are then thrown into the eccentric animated

world that mixes *Adventure Time*, *The Beano* and *Viz* comics with a slew of commercials introducing Barnsworth. "Give your wife the best. Give her Big Ron's Big Pies," says one. "Peas. Not quite peas. Not quite beans. But something special

in-betweens," another announces. The absurdist gags only escalate from there.

It's quickly made clear that the mayor is preoccupied so, naturally, exploring the town is the best way to kill time. Townsfolk

greet you with "thank goodness you're here" before assigning an unusual task. Advertised as a 'comedy slapformer' there's little to do in terms of controls: you move, jump and interact with anything and anyone by throwing a light jab. It's

A striking difference from any modern triple-A introduction

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 'comedy slapformer' that follows a travelling salesman who is given increasingly odd jobs

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Coal Supper

PUBLISHER
Panic

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
thankgoodness.game

lacking some flair though it's very accessible, and I can't wait to introduce it to those who traditionally don't play games.

The majority of gameplay revolves around going from one side of Barnsworth to the other and helping the locals, such as finding tools for the painfully Scottish Jasper, or coming to the aid of Herbert (voiced by the ever-excellent Matt Berry) the bamboozled gardener trying to unblock his hose, "I've been sucking this pipe for days," he exclaims. Our little yellow salesman will find his way through underground pipes, climb scaffolding poles and repeatedly fall into one unfortunate resident's living room, leaving a path of destruction in his wake. Everything is designed to make you laugh. Even the pause screen states "I've had enough," instead of just 'quit'.

Publisher Panic also worked on *Untitled Goose Game*, which recreated a British village in the south. Here, the core two-man team of James Carbutt and Will Todd have built from their original outlandish outing, *The Good Time Garden*, to design a wonderful love letter to their home county.



ABOVE: More innuendos than a Carry On flick.





TOP: *Thank Goodness You're Here* is filled with grate puzzles.

FAR RIGHT: Herbert is voiced by British actor and comedian Matt Berry.

BRITISH HUMOUR

Wandering around the linear streets is a joy, with every NPC spouting lines like, "Oooh, I do like my puzzles," in ridiculously high voices. My personal favourites are the unexpected dark quips, "Doug is the name. Rugs are the game. Janice the Wife. Died in Corfu, in 1992... don't ask me how." Comedy is incredibly subjective. Despite that, I'm confident there's something that will strike a funny bone or two, whether you're familiar with British humour or not.

Aside from progressing the narrative, numerous extra odd jobs can be fulfilled to earn a 100% completion that lends itself to multiple playthroughs. Hunting down a trio of singing rats found in bin bags, for instance. I managed to roll credits in about two-and-a-half hours and immediately wanted to jump back in to mop up what I missed. It's a shame a tiny technical hitch prevented said achievements from popping up during my first run, however that's the only problem I encountered. And considering the size of the team at Coal Supper, that's an achievement in itself. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Successfully blends zany characters, a slapstick setting and dark comedic beats to make one of the best games of 2024.

90



ANOTHER SATISFIED CUSTOMER

The Travelling Salesman



- 1 BUILD**
Small, agile and packs a fair punch.
- 2 ATTIRE**
White shirt, blue trousers and a dapper orange tie.
- 3 HAIR**
Thinning a bit. Ginger on yellow skin is a bold choice.
- 4 PERSONALITY**
Quiet but braced for double entendres wherever he goes.
- 5 SPECIAL SKILL**
The absolute patience of a saint.



BELOW: If you fall too far, this happens, and there are no saves.



MECH ME OVER

Move over Mario, here's mech-based platforming in **ARMORED SHELL NIGHTJAR**

Armored Shell Nightjar offers an experience mech-heads will be unable to resist: the chance to pilot a giant stompy mech from behind its imposing dashboard, by physically pulling levers, pushing buttons and adjusting sliders. It's a very specific kind of fantasy and one I'm only too happy to get onboard with, not least because Armored Shell lets me operate said dashboard – forces is probably the right word – with just the mouse.

Sure, it's not as tactile as using the *Steel Battalion* controller, but it immerses me behind the steering wheel well enough. Except it's not a steering wheel, but a joystick-looking thing at the bottom of the screen.

And to stomp forward, I push the throttle-looking thing on the right. I should probably Google the terminology, but I'm far too busy pulling this cord to make the mech jump vertically, and this enormous button to...

well, I should probably leave something for you to discover.

Controlling the mech is incredibly cumbersome, then, which is the best thing about it, of course. In fact, the best part of the whole game is prodding the dashboard to see which bits of it are interactive, discovering

what they do through lumbering trial and error. It's a surprisingly detailed dashboard screen, with an external camera you can use to gauge your position, and analogue levers that respond – a bit too sensitively,

unfortunately – to your clicking and dragging.

One mistake will often send you tumbling down the tower

NOT ROBOTS

The thing I haven't mentioned yet is that this is a mech game about platforming. And it's platforming from a first-person

perspective and from behind the tiny window in front of your pilot's chair. Do the controls I just described sound like the perfect fit for clambering up narrow slopes and walkways? No?

Well no, they are not, and one mistake will often send you

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A 3D platformer in which you pilot a cumbersome, stompy mech

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Warkus, Modus Interactive

PUBLISHER
Warkus, Modus Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/ArmoredShell

tumbling down the tower, probably to your doom.

Jumping up to an adjacent platform is a matter of lining up your viewing angle and pushing the throttle forwards before pulling the jump cord and hoping you've built up enough momentum. Oh, but pulling the cord brings the mouse cursor perilously close to the throttle beneath it, making you shift the mech into reverse at the last moment. Its stompy legs moonwalk backwards, right off the platform you were standing on...

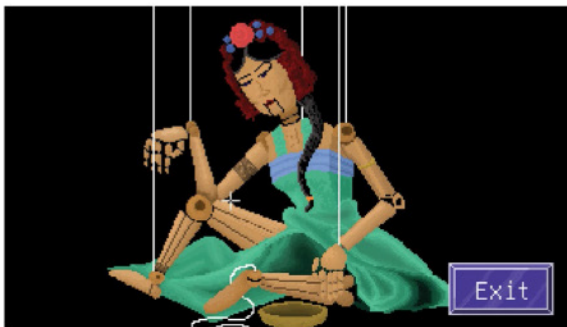
I can imagine a magazine from the late '90s scoring *Armored Shell Nightjar* something like 5%, but in the Bennett Foddy age I think we better appreciate the satisfaction of overcoming Sisyphean odds. I did get better over time, finding clever ways to work the mech's functions in tandem, and it did feel satisfying to master this lumbering beast. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A wonderfully mean and inventive mash-up of mech simulation and hardcore platforming. Will you love it, hate it?

62

BELOW: You might be in a fleshy hole, but at least your hair's not messed up.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Beyond Booleans

LINK
bit.ly/TeethOfGlass

BITING BACK

The tooth is out there in adventure **TEETH OF GLASS**

When a patient comes in with a bullet wound, it's your duty as a doctor to have a nosy inside. What you find in there – yes, a bullet, but also a geyser of black sludge that knocks you unconscious – sets the tone for this horror set in a compact space.

You wake up in the abandoned hospital to find that, among other oddities, a pile of chains is now smothering the only exit. Alone, you have to figure out what's going on and whether you even want to return to normality at the end of it. It's a tiny game world – if a corridor can even be described as such – but, like *PT*'s singular hallway, it's a corridor that changes as you progress through the story, though to a less dramatic extent. An eldritch entity has trapped you here, although it's some time before they introduce themselves.

The best horror stories have such uncanny imagery: something to lodge the story in your memory. The glass gnashers make a decent stab of that, even making a disturbing guest appearance round the patient's bullet wound, although the overall horror level of the game is fairly low. Despite a few standout moments, we're not shown enough of this eldritch world to understand why it's supposed to be scary, and the endings lack weight as a result.

Up until those anticlimactic moments, however, this is a strong horror short in a genre packed with them. The pixel art is exquisite and the puzzles are enjoyable to solve. This isn't quite up there with the *Midnight Scenes* series, but likers of horror adventure games will want to keep an close eye on the developer Beyond Booleans. ■

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SMOKE ALARM

THE INVISIBLE SMOKE FACTORY is back in a Flash

The Flash game era is sadly behind us, but here's a new point 'n' click adventure in its spirit. After finding an eviction notice and going to bed, you wake up in a dream realm that populates your apartment complex with mildly unsettling sights.

Surely the floor above you hasn't always been a pitch-black void? And did the corridor two floors up used to go on forever? In ominous office and factory environments, sketchily drawn people go about their business, playing their few frames of animation on a loop. This is as much a short film – or a multimedia installation – as it is a game, just like the Flash games I used to enjoy back in the day.

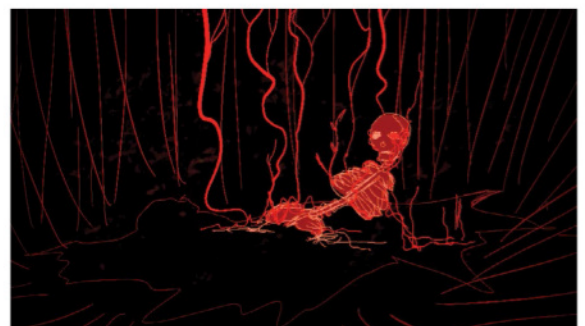
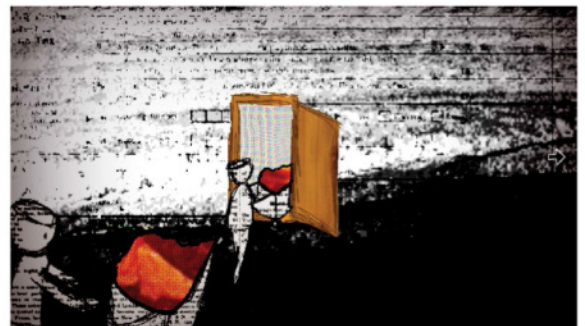
What will you see after you go up the next flight of stairs? It's not random nonsense, but related to the theme of work, and in a subtle,

uncanny and dreamlike way. The dream world changes as you make progress, and sometimes you are required to (briefly) wake up in order to move things forward.

It took me a couple of tries to find all the collectable diary pages and arrive at an ending, which was almost Lynchian in the way it instilled unease on the strength of its imagery alone. The first time I played, I was put off by one particularly maze-like environment, which I found an absolute pain to navigate. The second time around, it wasn't quite so bad.

And yet the vibes are immaculate: the *Silent Hill*-esque sound effects, and the hand-drawn animations that play over grainily repurposed photos of dreary work environments. It's not horror, but it's close, and I find that almost a cosy place to be. ■

BELOW: It's a sizable world, with plenty of unusual sights to discover.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Kanderwund

LINK
bit.ly/InvisibleSmoke

76

The first time you have dinner with your new in-laws.



How do you like it?

DOUBLE DUTCH

The quiet joy of unplaying **RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2**

I don't think I've ever been so delighted to do bollock-all in a game. While other players might want to catch outlaws or pull off daring heists, all I want to do is brew coffee, brush my horse, and oil my rifle. It's a game that's best when you're doing things that sound like saucy euphemisms instead of playing it.

Before that, though, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is like a new roll of toilet paper that refuses to tear: mostly white and difficult to start. It's a minor complaint about a game that's so thoughtfully crafted, but the first few hours of the game are spent trudging through snow and squinting through blizzards. It's a characterful opening, but a laborious one for anyone hungry to ride out into the wilderness and lasso strangers.

The controls are another source of frustration. They're context-sensitive, so there are some moments when you have to study the on-screen prompts like a nervous new driver looking down at the gearstick during hill start. Some of these are minor, if inexplicable, such as having one button for picking up weapons and another for grabbing your hat. More

frustrating is the game's tendency to switch the aim button during moments of high drama. On one occasion this led to me gunning down a railway guard I was planning to let live, because it's also the button for shooting from the hip. I emptied a chamber into him instead of waving my gun about, which was irritating, even if it did encourage the remaining guards to behave.

I saw one NPC get brained by the horse he was trying to reshoe

ARIZONA STRANGER

One you've got used to this, however, it uncovers a game that's unparalleled in its dedication to doing things slowly. Everything, from the breathtaking landscapes to the detailed general stores, is crammed with absurd detail. And there are few things more satisfying than seeing a landmark in the distance

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The *Deadwood* game we didn't dare dream would ever exist

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Rockstar Games

PUBLISHER
Rockstar Games

Intel Core i7-7700,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Online PvP, Online
co-op

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1174180/Red_Dead_Redemption_2

and exploring it, just because. The wilderness of *Red Dead* is tangible and intoxicating, somehow both lonely and dense at the same time. There are moments when you'll ride into the middle of nowhere just to watch the sun rise, and it feels like you're the only person in the world. At the same time, however, the human interactions are numerous and memorable. I saw one NPC get brained by the horse he was trying to reshoe. And I stumbled across a dilapidated pig farm, home to incestuous siblings who robbed me and left me for dead in the shallow grave of their murdered mother. I went back, killed the brother and dumped the hogtied sister in the same open grave. It sounds unhinged when I write it down, but at the time it felt like justice. Even when you're planning on doing nothing, the drama and weirdness of *Red Dead* seeks you out. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Control issues don't stop this being epic, affecting, magnificent. A world this huge has no business feeling handcrafted.

90

BELOW: The bone tokens were in a transparent pig? How did you know?!



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.80

DEVELOPER
Daniel Mullins Games

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

CARD TARGET

Experiencing cabin fever in the excellent **INSCRIPTION**

I have a theory that terrible things happen to people just because they want to avoid making a scene. Imagine it: you kick up a fuss, but, in reality, your fire-eyed kidnapper just wanted some human company. Wouldn't that be painfully awkward?

This is one of many things in *Inscryption* which plays not only with my expectations as someone who plays games, but also my obedience. It's like the game is using my awkward Britishness against me. I'm reluctant to stand up from the table and explore the shack in which I'm imprisoned, let alone play with the cursed trinkets that adorn the walls. And when I do finally start doing this, it's only because a talking stoat on a sentient playing card told me to do so. My first hour with the game is literally spent testing the

amorphous boundaries the game has set, and trying not to make things weirder than they already are.

This even extends to the way I play the game (or at least play part of it; it's basically five games in one). The stoat keeps judging my decisions and drags me when I sacrifice it; whereas the stinkbug is chipper and supportive. I feel like a man on a desert island making friends with a sandal. This would already be rather tragic, but the fact I'm taking their advice makes it worse.

I haven't really had space to talk about any of the surprising and brilliant things the game does. There's so much invention here that I feel impressed by the malign entity I'm trapped with. Did you whittle these figurines yourself? Maybe I will have another game after all. I don't want it to be awks. ■

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YETI AGAIN

Getting sas-squashed in the name of science in **BIGFOOT**

There's not so much a theme to this month's column, but a feeling. The closest we can get is 'cabin-in-the-woods-core', like identifying a body in a corpse with Pinterest boards. Slouchy knitwear, a vintage video camera, hiking boots, Twin Peaks badges, entrails hanging from branches like fairy lights in a child's bedroom.

Bigfoot is basically this, but a game; a horror movie in which soft, aspiring cryptozoologists venture into the forest then end up smashed against tree stumps by a malign force of nature. Mechanically, it's similar to *Phasmophobia*, a game it preceded by three years. You collect technological doodads from your home base and venture into the wild to ensure Bigfoot, whatever species it actually is, becomes extinct. We can learn about it once it's dead.

There's something silly and satisfying about setting up cameras and baiting traps, like the doomed protagonists in the first quarter of a budget shocker. The pace of the game definitely helps, too. Most of your time is spent sprinting through the undergrowth and checking cameras to triangulate Bigfoot's location. This is usually more effective than the actual confrontations, which are short and shocking. It probably wouldn't work as a game if the pace was quicker. The dramatic moments land because there's so much quiet, gentle busywork beforehand.

It's technically shaky in places, but worth enduring if you want to pretend you're the guest star in the opening of an episode of *The X-Files*. It also does a good job of making one of the least scary creatures in folklore effective. ■

68

BELOW: The Blumhouse reboot of Dawson's Creek is an improvement.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.80

DEVELOPER
CyberLight Game Studio

PUBLISHER
CyberLight Game Studio



**AFTER A CATACLYSMIC DISASTER, THE SURVIVAL OF YOUR PEOPLE
HINGES ON YOUR WITS, FORESIGHT, AND RESILIENCE.**



REBUILD.



EXPLORE.



SURVIVE.



HARDWARE

GET THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS



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GROUP TEST

Six new wireless routers tested, including Wi-Fi 6, Wi-Fi 6E and Wi-Fi 7.

100

TECH REPORT

For gaming mice, does familiarity matter more than specs?



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Building a dedicated sim racing space in an average family house.



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BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a top gaming PC no matter your budget.

GROUP TEST

WIRELESS ROUTERS

Take to the airwaves with these high-speed networking wonders

By Ian Evenden



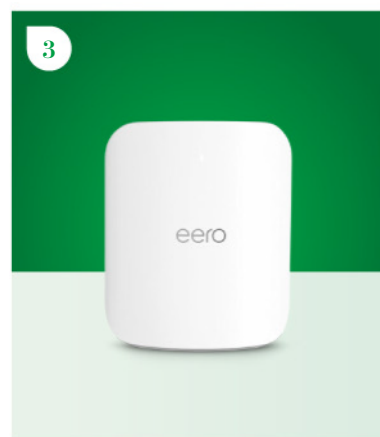
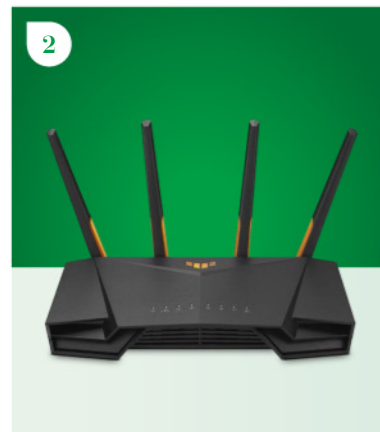
Wi-Fi routers may not be the most exciting hardware ever to grace these pages, but the chances

are every one of us has one, whether it's the latest high-speed model or some junk sent to us by our ISP. Increasingly, we're seeing models advertised as 'gaming' routers, not because they'll run *Doom* – though as you can play that on a printer they probably can – but because

they detect and prioritise gaming traffic so that your family's Netflix habits don't interfere with your *Destiny 2* addiction.

Whether you really need the latest networking equipment depends on your device collection, and how you connect to the internet. Sharing a multi-gig fibre connection may require expensive Wi-Fi 7 and fast Ethernet, but with the average internet hookup well below this, getting a new router is a balancing act between features and cost.





Archer GE800

TP-LINK **£693**

Pretty fly for a Wi-Fi

1 Simply the best router we've tested, the Archer GE800 offers Wi-Fi 7, fast Ethernet, easy setup and the kind of looks that have you wondering if you've seen The Last Jedi too many times. If you're setting up a network with lots of client devices, some Ethernet-appreciating items like home servers, a really fast internet connection and a gaming PC, then it's going to fulfil all your needs for the next five years at least.

The 2.4GHz band, which is where you're going to put all your IoT stuff as well as visitors' phones and older gear that

can't manage the higher frequency bands, is especially good, and the quad-core chipset means it can handle a lot of traffic at once.

However, it's also expensive, large, and pretty heavy for a router, and isn't the sort of thing that will easily fade into the background thanks to some LED lighting effects (that you can and will turn off). But find it a firm enough place to stand, and it will move the Earth.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Fast
→ Full-featured
→ Expensive

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: WI-FI 7 / ETHERNET HUB: SIX PORTS / WAN: 10GBIT / DIMENSIONS: 292 X 207 X 224 MM / WEIGHT: 2.21KG

TUF Gaming AX4200

ASUS **£140**

Cut costs and wires

2 Sometimes all you need are the basics, and the basics done well. And that's what you get from this Asus TUF. It's a plain old Wi-Fi 6 router, so there's no 6GHz band to play with, but you do get a 2.5Gb WAN port to accept a really fast internet connection, that can then be spread out across four gigabit Ethernet ports and a 5GHz Wi-Fi network, as well as the slower but longer-ranged 2.4GHz network for unimportant devices. These bands tend to get congested if you've got a lot of devices vying for attention, which is why the extra 6GHz band on 6E and 7

routers is so useful, as it can be hived off for a gaming laptop in the same room, but Wi-Fi 6 was a good upgrade from Wi-Fi 5 when it launched back in 2019, and it's still fast and reliable today. As a budget pick, this router may not have the bells and whistles of other models, but if you're looking for an upgrade over an ageing ISP-supplied network hub, then you're going to see better performance for a little less outlay, and that's worthwhile.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Reasonably priced
→ Wi-Fi 6
→ Not the newest

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: WI-FI 6 / ETHERNET HUB: FOUR PORTS / WAN: 2.5GBIT / DIMENSIONS: 265 X 178 X 70 MM / WEIGHT: 575G

ONE DAY, TECH COMPANIES WILL STOP LETTING MEMBERS OF THE NINJA TURTLES NAME THINGS



GROUP TEST

Max 7

EERO £600

Meshed potatoes

3 Plain white and dumpy, which is as far as I'm going to go in comparing them to potatoes just to justify that pun up there, Eero's latest mesh routers can be used alone or in groups to provide wireless internet across larger areas without having to use those irritating extenders you plug into power sockets and which then don't work properly.

As an Amazon offshoot, the setup process of the Max 7 has been streamlined like an SR-71, which means these are ideal for home setup by the less network-savvy among us, but if you like to set DMZs, open

NATs and otherwise tweak your router's configuration in search of optimum performance, then these are perhaps not the units to go for. The other problem with a mesh system is that, by definition, you're going to want more than one node, and at £600 each you'll need to be finding a home for a lot of traffic to justify spending quite that much when something else might be able to do the job just as well.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent mesh performance
- Very easy setup
- Lacks advanced options

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: WI-FI 7 / **ETHERNET HUB:** FOUR PORTS / **WAN:** 2.5GB / **DIMENSIONS:** 184 X 222 X 90 MM / **WEIGHT:** 1.45KG

AXE75

TP-LINK £180

Wi-Fi 6E that won't break the bank

4 The E in Wi-Fi 6E naturally stands for 'Extreme' – as we're deep down the rabbit hole of PC peripherals now, and everything's extreme or possibly bodacious. One day, tech companies will stop letting members of the Ninja Turtles name things, but not today. What Wi-Fi 6E does is supply an extra network band to the Wi-Fi 6 standard, at 6Ghz. This means you need a Wi-Fi chip in your PC or phone that can listen that high in order to use it, and also means it's potentially fast but short-ranged, as the higher the frequency of an electromagnetic wave, the harder

a time it has passing through solid objects. And we all have those in our homes. The Wi-Fi throughput of this router isn't as high as the Wi-Fi 7 models, but you're also not spending nearly as much cash on it. The input WAN socket is also a low 1Gbit, so anyone with a higher expectation from their fibre connection should look elsewhere. For the rest of us, however, the AXE75 is a good way to make some use of the 6E card in your gaming PC.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Fast Wi-Fi 6E
- Not all that expensive
- But not Wi-Fi 7

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: WI-FI 6E / **ETHERNET HUB:** FOUR PORTS / **WAN:** 1GB / **DIMENSIONS:** 273 X 147 X 49 MM / **WEIGHT:** 734G



**INTERNET SPEEDS
WE PROBABLY WON'T SEE
FOR AT LEAST A DECADE**

5



RT-BE88U

ASUS £339

Wires, wires everywhere

5 One of the best things you can do when setting up a new wireless router is to change the SSID that's set by default into something profane and/or funny. This will then be broadcast into your neighbours' houses and make them wonder why a Drug Surveillance Van has pulled up outside or when the evil genius next door is going to offer them a tour of his Secret Underground Base. This is, obviously, hilarious and brings a moment of levity to the very serious world of networking, which is something best done down an Ethernet cable. Wired

connections are more stable, don't involve messing around with passwords, are less likely to be intercepted or interfered with and running cables under carpets and through ducts is just plain fun. There are eight Ethernet ports on the back of this router, along with a Wi-Fi 7 implementation that for some reason doesn't use the extra 6GHz band. Not that you'll need it, you're connected with 50ft of Cat 6 cable and you're happy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Lots of Ethernet ports
- Relatively cheap
- No 6GHz

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: Wi-Fi 7 / **ETHERNET HUB**: EIGHT PORTS / **WAN**: 10GB / **DIMENSIONS**: 300 X 188 X 61 MM / **WEIGHT**: 1KG

JARGON BUSTER

Wi-Fi 8: 802.11bn isn't available yet, but coming.

Wi-Fi 7: Otherwise known as 802.11be, this is the latest (at the time of writing) wireless standard that takes all of Wi-Fi 6's features and makes them better by doubling channel widths for increased speeds and reduced latency.

Wi-Fi 6E: Wi-Fi 6 that extends into a new 6GHz band. Good for fast, short-ranged connections.

Wi-Fi 6: The 802.11ax standard is pretty common now, and the lowest you should be looking at in a new router. It offers two bands, 2.4GHz and 5GHz, and comes with all sorts of clever tricks such as beamforming and multi-MIMO, and can handle 12 streams at once.

Wi-Fi 5: 802.11ac – if you're using an ISP router, this might be what you've got. Decent if you've not got a fast internet connection, but worth an upgrade from.

Wi-Fi 4: 802.11n. Upgrade right now.

Nighthawk RS700S

NETGEAR £799

If a thing's worth doing, it's worth overdoing

6 Netgear's Nighthawk routers have always been the first port of call if you're looking for something that can handle a lot of inputs and outputs, and the RS700S is no exception. Plonk one of these down on the shelf, kick your old router out of the way, and you'll be plugging in to years of excellent Wi-Fi. There's a 10Gb WAN port, for internet speeds we probably won't see in the suburbs for at least a decade, and it can squirt that all down a single Ethernet output (that's probably the one you want to plug your gaming PC into, though if you've only got a

gigabit network card it's a bit of a waste) or spread it throughout your home over Wi-Fi 7. Its throughput to a single client is potentially very fast, but having a router like this also brings the capability to connect to lots of different devices simultaneously, and if you've got Wi-Fi in your lightbulbs and your fridge can talk to your phone, then you might want to avoid congestion so those urgent WhatsApp messages can get through too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Wi-Fi 7
- Future-proof
- Over-specced for most

SPECS WIRELESS STANDARD: Wi-Fi 7 / **ETHERNET HUB**: FOUR PORTS / **WAN**: 10GBPS / **DIMENSIONS**: 281X124X142MM / **WEIGHT**: 1.64KG



Putting in the hard yards with your current setup will boost performance more than new kit.

OLD HAND

For **GAMING MICE**, does familiarity matter more than specs?

They say familiarity breeds contempt. Then again, how often do you see *them* popping up at *Counter-Strike 2* majors? All of which is to say that when it comes to our gaming setups, there are two opposing forces locked in an eternal tug of war across our meticulously RGBed desk. On one side, the PC gaming hardware industry and its ever-changing roster of products, each featuring slightly higher numbers and vaguely different-sounding features than the last. Peripheral makers make us a tacit promise that this latest cool thing they've been working on will make us better gamers.

On the other side is our muscle memory. The divots we've furrowed into our neural pathways over innumerable hours spent attuning to our current, imperfect, outdated setups. We sit down, our hands find their way around our familiar mouse and keyboard, and our K:D finds its groove. So who's right? Does new, technologically advanced gear make us play better, or is our familiarity with our own setup a greater asset?

In a huge oversight on the part of the academic world, there isn't much scientific literature about this phenomenon. But perhaps statistics can help. As of Q1 2024, the most used mouse in all of esports was the Logitech G Pro Superlight. It had around 30% market share, according to prosettings.net.

The more recent Superlight 2 had about 8% of pros using it. Those figures tell us a lot. Not only does it demonstrate that at the very upper echelons of gaming where every drop of performance must be squeezed out like energy drink from a gaudy 500ml can, simplicity, reliability and ergonomics matter more than anything else, it also tells us that familiarity counts for most of all.

After all, if the pros liked the original Superlight so much, why wouldn't they immediately flock to the Superlight 2 when it came out? Its polling rate is 4K rather than 1K. Its tracking speed is 100ips higher, and its DPI can go all the way up to 32K. Because all those things matter less than the countless hours that pro players have spent with their exact mouse, using the exact same settings, on the exact same mouse mat, using the exact same grip. It's those hard yards of practice that make you a good player. The stats are just there to sell mice.

Or are they? I used to think so, until I started reviewing mice regularly and running performance tests in Aimlabs to see how each new model stacked up against my baseline performance with the Zowie FK1 I'd been using since, and I'm ashamed to admit this, mid-2015.

SCENARIO TESTING

Usually the Aimlabs testing would go the way you'd expect it to: I'd run through the usual scenarios and notice that my



Love Hz

First it was DPI. Bigger was better, usability be damned. Then when enough of us complained that, actually, 20,000 DPI mode isn't useful for much except making your PC unusable to intruders, mouse manufacturers moved on. Polling rate has become the in-vogue stat of recent years and, although its numbers have a more sensible real-world application since it defines how well it captures your own movements rather than sheer sensitivity, it's still over-emphasised for marketing purposes.



score was either about the same or a bit lower than usual, but with the better mice I could feel that with some further tweaking to DPI and in-game sensitivity, along with a few more hours of adjustment and practice, I might be able to break through the plateau. Then a mouse would come along that I was just better with, immediately. Instant paradigm shift.

I've been using the Razer Viper V3 Hyperspeed non-stop since it released for that very reason. Something about its shape, its tracking characteristics and the way it glides across my QPad Heaton hard-top mouse mat really complements my grip type, preferred DPI and in-game sensitivity settings. I posted better scores in Aimlabs the day the Viper arrived.

Of course, Aimlabs is a slight abstraction from in-game performance. The way a particular game engine processes mouse input, the amount of recoil compensation you have to input, and how aiming down sights reduces your sensitivity, all these things feel incredibly specific from one game to the next and they exacerbate the differences you sense with a new mouse. Even though my new 'chosen one' mouse felt correct under my hand, it still took a few days of practice in *PUBG* and *Counter-Strike 2*, along with some settings fine-tuning, until I felt like I was shooting back to my best.

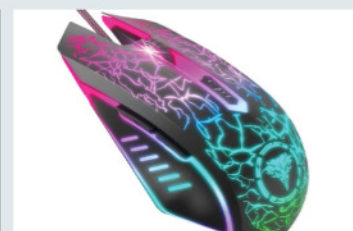
AIMLABS IS A SLIGHT ABSTRACTION FROM IN-GAME PERFORMANCE

BALLS TO IT *Four redundant PC mouse trends of old*



ADJUSTABLE WEIGHTS

Remember when your mouse came with a set of tiny weights? It was like a drug dealer collab gone wrong.



RGB EVERYTHING

If your hand isn't glowing like the digits of some Marvel movie deity, your mouse needs more RGB.



ADJUSTABLE DIMENSIONS

Mad Catz' RAT was where gaming mouse met Savile Row tailor. Tweak every dimension to fit.



TOO MANY BUTTONS

Why bother with a keyboard, when you can contract RSI just as quickly by using a mouse for every input?

There are other variables, of course. Speaking personally, I've never experienced a bigger or more immediate bump to my own in-game performances than when graduating from 60Hz to 120Hz. Gaming mice are precision-engineered things crafted by fearsomely smart designers and engineers, but they can't make you better at games than the jump to a high refresh rate can. Target tracking at 120Hz or above versus 60Hz would still feel transformative if you were using a ball mouse with a PS2 plug.

And unlike your mouse of choice, it's hard to argue that persevering with a lower refresh rate simply because you're more familiar with it is likely to lead to long-term performance gains. This isn't a matter of muscle memory winning out over better tech – you're simply getting more information into your eyes, and the advantage of that is too great to leave on the table.

Polling rate is about more information too. Why isn't that such a no-brainer? Probably because of the marginal gains effect. Just as the jump from 60Hz to 120Hz feels far more profound than 120Hz to 240Hz, at anything above 1000Hz polling it's very difficult to perceive a difference in the feel of your tracking or the smoothness of your aim.

To return to the original question, then: familiarity or better tech? While some tech breakthroughs will yield a transformative experience, most of the time the marginal gains on new mouse models are more relevant to spec sheets than real-world use, and time spent practising with your current hardware will almost certainly give you a bigger performance increase than an upgrade would. ■

Phil Iwanik

NEW MANOEUVRES

Building a dedicated sim racing space in an average family house

The problem with sim racing isn't that it's not fun enough. No PC gamer with even a fleeting regard for suspension stiffness has done a few laps in a sim with a good direct drive wheel and said to themselves, "Well that was boring. On with my life". If you don't believe me, watch someone try a sim racing rig for the very first time – whether they ordinarily play games or not, the grin that takes over their face when they get up to speed is life-affirming.

No, the problem is that the hardware and space requirements are really high. Similar to VR, it's a big financial investment that you need to find a dedicated space in your house for, and while VR at least offers a range of genres and experiences beyond gaming, the same can't be said about that £1,000 Fanatec gearstick you just bought.

This has been an ongoing knot in my mind for years. I love sim racing, but I can never quite arrive on a setup that satisfies me. I've tried to make it work with just a gamepad and a clenched jaw, hoping I'd be able to render the whole wheel and pedals thing unnecessary with my sheer precision and record-setting pace with a pad. I was wrong about that.

And even if it turned out that I was the controller-wagging equivalent of Jarno Opmeer, I'd still have felt I was missing out on something. One of the perks of this job is that you're occasionally invited to play games on absolutely preposterous setups like F1 teams' professional simulators and giant platforms with electronic actuators that throw you about. Once you've tasted how sweet the nectar of money-no-object rigs really is, it's hard to be content hotlapping in *Assetto Corsa* with an Xbox Elite controller and a cup of tea.

PEDAL SETUPS

Wheel and pedals setups bring more precision to your inputs, but also a lot more immersion. Particularly now that manufacturers have started to offer modular ecosystems with swappable wheels so that you can mirror the discipline you're racing at that moment.

There are two ways to race with a wheel and pedals. The first is to attach them to a sled, or 'simulator chair' as their manufacturers call them, as if we're chiding them by using an unnecessarily formal name. The second is to clamp the wheels to your desk, put the pedals on the floor underneath it and drive from your desk chair. There are two issues with the latter, and both will drive you to the point of insanity.

First, at your desk it can never be a permanent setup. You'll always need to unclamp it and find somewhere to store it when it's not in use. And will you unplug all the cables? Or leave them hanging somewhere they'll inevitably form a tangle denser than a jungle canopy? An impossible choice.

Second, your desk chair is probably on wheels, and those wheels will propel you backwards whenever you stomp down

on the throttle or brakes. You can buy products that keep your chair in place, but it's an inelegant solution.

Having also tried to persevere with the desk setup for years, by 2024 I'd finally ruled it out and decided to commit to a sled setup. The obvious downside here is that you're permanently accounting for a large chunk of space with a big bucket seat that's hard to explain to visitors. Nevertheless, I carted a Playseat Sensation Pro up two flights of stairs, assembled it, and installed a Thrustmaster T-GT II on it.

Finding the space meant removing six large boxes from the spare room and finding somewhere to put their contents. But the rewards! I sit in the seat and all the angles are perfect. I can stomp on the load cell pedal with all the force I please, and I'm not pushed backwards.

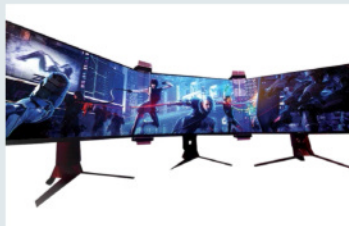
Committing to that setup gives me the motivation to make time for practice. It's more alluring than the sight of a wheel clamped to a desk that I know I'll have to disassemble. It's not going to make me faster than a desk setup would, but I'm going to enjoy it more. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

**I CAN NEVER
QUITE ARRIVE ON
A SETUP THAT
SATISFIES ME**

DRIVER UPDATE

Four ways to level up your sim racing setup



TRIPLE-MONITOR SETUP

The extra peripheral vision that three panels gives you really adds to the sense of speed, and makes braking markers easier to spot.



120HZ OR HIGHER

Higher framerates have just as profound effect here as in any shooter, so high-refresh monitors are desirable for any sim racer.



SWAPPABLE WHEELS

Since manufacturers started selling wheelbases with quick-release catches, a whole world has been opened up.



LOAD CELL PEDALS

The swappable load cells beneath the brake mean you can adjust the braking force required to hit full brake pressure.



PHIL IWANIUK

We were encouraged to hear of freelancer Phil's 'portable sim racing setup'... until we spotted him on a park bench outside the office, holding a dinner plate and doing car noises.



ABOVE: At pro level, nearly all sim racers use direct-drive wheel setups.

LEFT: Sleds give you the best angles, but most can't be stowed away when they're not in use.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

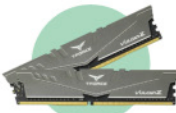
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,008

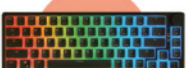
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £103 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200. This is the sweet spot for RAM right now, as DDR5 can be expensive.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £90 Say it with me now: never skimp on the power supply. This is the minimum recommended for the Radeon GPU.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £67 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape and 8,000 DPI optical sensor delivered in a sleek shell, this wired mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,535

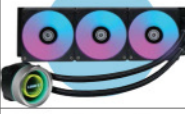
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £390 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Freezer 36 Arctic £24 It's cheap yet effective – you can't ask for more than that. With two fans and four heatpipes, it'll go at up to 1,800 rpm.
MEMORY		Vengeance 16GB DDR5-5200 Corsair £65 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £73 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,858

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £229 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Azoth Asus £250 This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha Wireless HyperX £135 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUING ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I still enjoy hearing Cassandra grumble and Dorian be debonair”

Replaying **DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION** has recalibrated my expectations for The Veilguard

I had a good time with *Dragon Age: Inquisition* when it came out. But it had the misfortune to come out six months before *The Witcher 3*, which rewrote everyone's expectations for what this kind of open-enclosure RPG could be. *The Witcher 3* asks, “What if sidequests were as good as main quests?” Compared to that, zones full of collectable shards and connect-the-dots puzzles look pretty weak.

While the timing of its release didn't do *Inquisition* any favours, it could have been worse. If it had come out when *Mass Effect: Andromeda* did, at the peak of ‘I've found a gif of some wonky animation’ tweeting, it would have been mocked as thoroughly as *Andromeda* was.

JODY MACGREGOR



THIS MONTH
Prayed to Mythral.

ALSO PLAYED
Chim, Clickolding

In my current playthrough I've seen characters zipping back and forth at light speed in the background and flung into position from space as a cutscene begins. Hair clips through faces, and smirks become horrible rictus grins whenever anyone says something that's been tagged as ‘snarky’ in the scripting spreadsheet.

(VEIL)GUARDED PRAISE

At the time we ignored that stuff for the same reason we did in all the better BioWare games: the writing. And though this replay has found me

TOP: You can't get a decent cuppa in Orlais.

less patient with open-world guff than I was in 2014, I still enjoy hearing Cassandra grumble and Dorian be debonair.

The Iron Bull is a favourite. A brash, shirtless Qunari, he seems to get along with every other character. Even Vivienne the ice queen warms up to him when he starts deferentially calling her “ma'am”. Thing is, Bull's a spy. Though the network he works for is on your side, because it's hard not to be given the *Inquisition's* whole ‘save the world’ remit, he remains a trained manipulator. Even when you remember he's a spy it's easy to read

HE LISTENED TO THE SONG HALLELUJAH ON REPEAT WHILE WRITING SOLAS



his interactions on a more superficial level, though.

The same is true of Solas, who comes off quite differently when you know his whole deal. When Solas is talking about his trips to the Fade where he watches preserved events of historical and religious significance, his voice gains a singsong quality. Patrick Weekes, who wrote Solas' dialogue, said that he listened to the song Hallelujah on repeat while writing Solas, and it crept into these passages. Solas says, "I've journeyed deep into the Fade / In ancient ruins and battlefields / To see the dreams of lost civilisations."

He repeats this pattern in several conversations. If you choose lines that continue the rhythm, that match his flow, you get that little pop-up, "Solas slightly approves".

What makes me feel positive about *The Veilguard* is that Weekes is back to write it. I don't expect it to have perfectly animated cutscenes, sidequests as well-realised as the main ones, or even combat that's anything to write home about, because none of the previous ones did. I do expect it to have companions I feel emotional about, because that's been true of *Dragon Age* despite its ups and downs. ■



"Ouch, that's gotta hurt!"

Shooting Nazis in **RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Brutally gunned
down many a Nazi.

ALSO PLAYED
Persona 3 Reload,
Baldur's Gate III

Storming through the halls of Castle Wolfenstein, which are festooned with swastika banners, occult reliquary and propaganda posters for the fascist regime, all I can think of is, "Boy do Nazis love their medieval suits of armour".

I mean, I can barely storm into a single room or corridor without being confronted with an awfully shiny medieval knight, with me swiftly losing track of their number as I run and gun my way to freedom. If the Nazis living in this draughty old castle were especially fond of these suits of armour, then they're definitely not going to like me, US Army Ranger William 'BJ' Blazkowitz, as I've swiftly adopted a new hobby of shooting these antiquities to pieces.

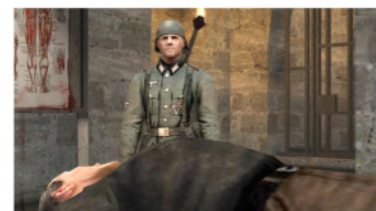
This is not just to spite my Nazi opponents, but also to bask in the glorious animation of these hulking suits of armour collapsing on the floor when assaulted, something that *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* manages to impress with in most of its animations. Guards, attempting to get the jump on me, creep about with

genuine slinky stealth, while Nazis charge down corridors and take cover as if their life depends on it.

CROTCH SHOT

And, actually, their lives do depend on it, as when I'm not gunning down suits of armour I'm gunning down Nazis, lots of them. Nazis, riddled with bullets from my MP40 machine gun, spin violently backwards dropping their weapon in the process, while those headshotted fall silently, slumping to the ground as if it was always to be, destined by the fates. Nazi captains lose their oh-so-smart looking hats, sent flying off their heads by my assault, and one unfortunate captain bursts through a door only to have his crotch get in the way of a hail of my 9×19mm Parabellum bullets. He keels over in agony, before bleeding out, crotchless on the floor. Ouch, that's gotta hurt!

By today's standards the feel of the weapons, NPC animations, and cutscene storytelling in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* are all noticeably old hat, but there's still no escaping the fast-paced, violently engaging combat, which does still make shooting Nazis plenty of fun. Especially in the crotch. ■



“I like *Pillars of Eternity* better than *Baldur’s Gate III*”

PILLARS OF ETERNITY deserves a bigger space in the CRPG pantheon

My friends, I find myself at a precipice. What began as a simple and fun bit of CRPG domino theory – a playthrough of *Baldur’s Gate III* leading into a playthrough of the original trilogy, then *Fallout*, and now, climactically, *Pillars of Eternity* – has brought me face to face with my innermost demons. Made me question things I thought were beyond question. Forced me look myself in the mirror and, voice shaking, whisper, “I think I like *Pillars of Eternity* better than *Baldur’s Gate III*”.

It’s a take so hot it might set this magazine alight, but I really mean it. With zero disrespect intended to Larian’s masterpiece, which has earned all the praise it gets and into which I will pour many more hundreds of hours in the years to come, there’s just something about the *Pillars* world of Eora that does it for me in a way that Faerûn doesn’t.

CONTEXT IS KEY

Pillars of Eternity does what all my favourite games do: it demands I take

▶ JOSHUA WOLENS



THIS MONTH
Went soul-searching.

ALSO PLAYED
Elden Ring, Resident Evil 5

a 101-level history course in order to properly understand what’s going on. As a game, it’s just as much about your investment in your party of misfits and weirdos as *Baldur’s Gate III* or any BioWare series, but that party feels so much more grounded in – and part of – the world they come from than the heroes of *Baldur’s Gate III*.

That’s no sleight against Larian. Faerûn has always been a worldwide renaissance faire, a grab-bag of fantasy tropes and aesthetics you use as the backdrop for your party of weirdos and misfits, and that’s no

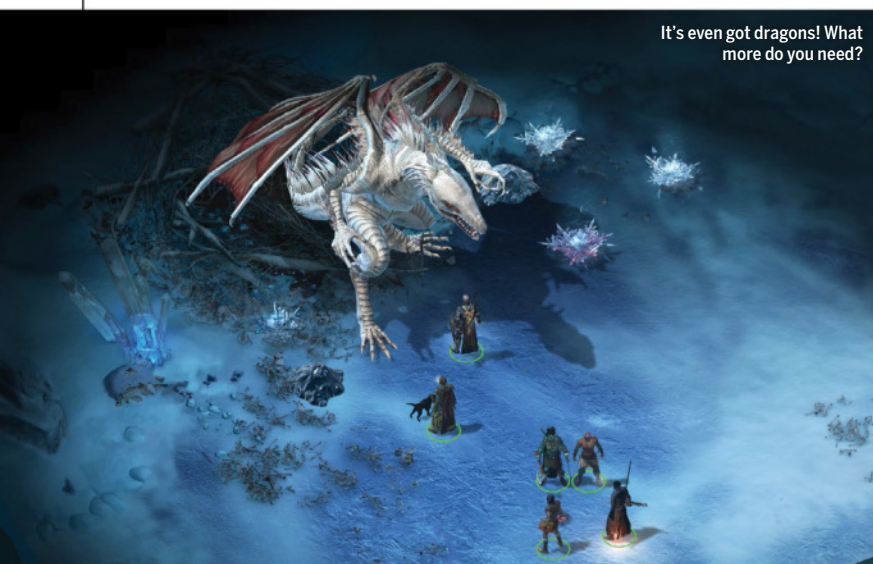
different in *Baldur’s Gate III*. Sure, you can pick up a book and delve into the lore if you want, but it’s not essential. I can understand Astarion and Karlach just by chatting to them. I don’t need to take a course on the history of the Forgotten Realms to understand their trauma. Or to get very excited about kissing them.

But *Pillars* rewards curiosity about its wider world, and its party members become richer and deeper the more you read about and understand their context. They’re people who are shaped by, and shape, the world around them.

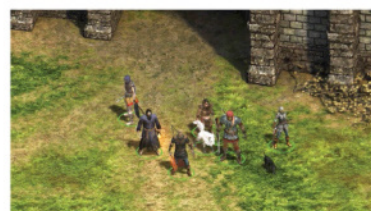
It’s practically Obsidian’s house style, and you can find it in games like *New Vegas* and *Deadfire* too. It’s also very hard to pull off. You need to trust that your players will find your world as interesting as you do.

That’s probably a big reason the *Pillars of Eternity* games – both of them – remain so little-discussed and underrated. They’re nowhere near as technically slick as modern cinematic RPGs and they demand a bit too much work for true mass appeal, but they’re genuine – and genuinely deep – achievements. They should be given the praise they deserve. ■

THEY’RE PEOPLE WHO ARE SHAPED BY, AND SHAPE, THE WORLD AROUND THEM

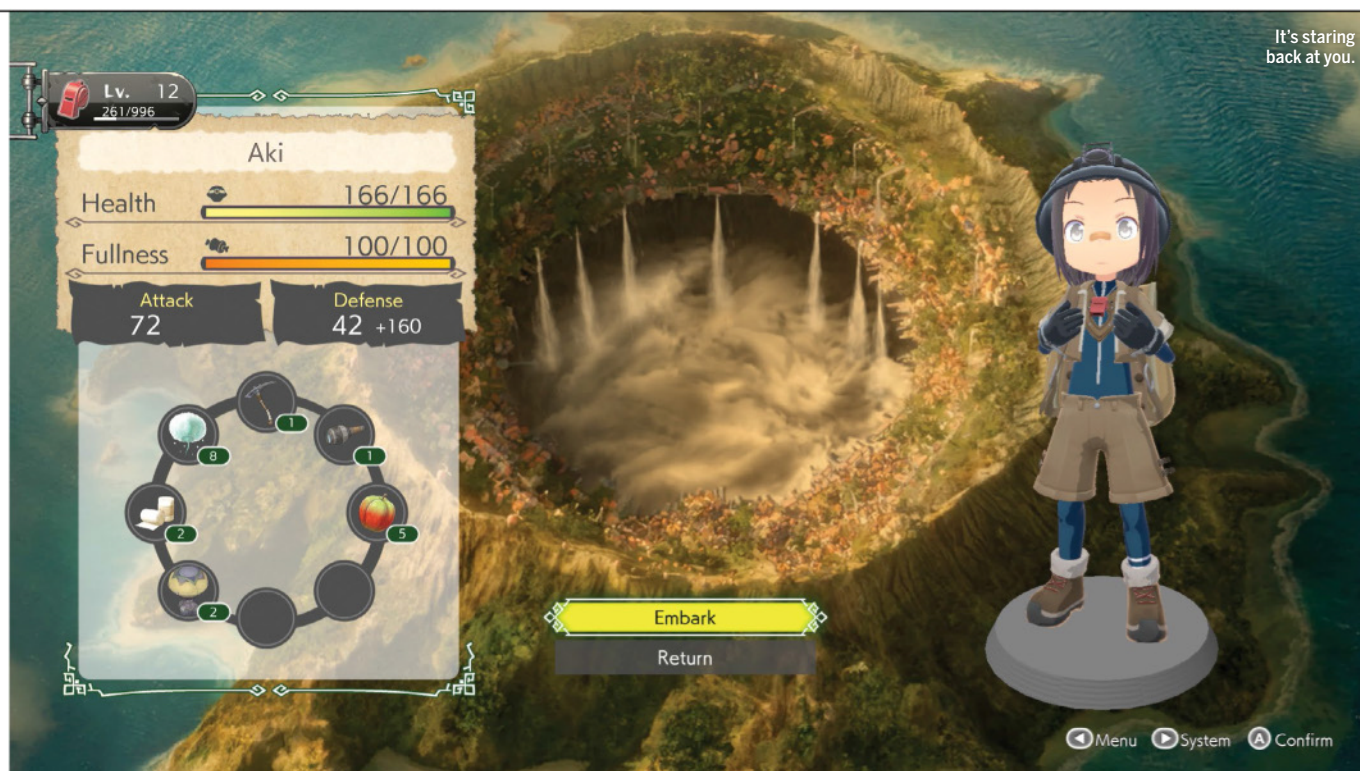


It’s even got dragons! What more do you need?



BELOW: Are we ready to admit real-time with pause is the best?





“A harrowing dark fantasy about hapless, bright-eyed children”

Spelunking into hell with **MADE IN ABYSS: BINARY STAR FALLING INTO DARKNESS**

I'm still not sure what possessed me to return to an obscure, rough-hewn anime tie-in from the depths of my backlog instead of playing any of the fantastic things released this year, but I've not been regretting my time spelunking into hell with *Made in Abyss: Binary Star Falling into Darkness*. It might not be the best I've played recently, but it's one of the most interesting.

For those unfamiliar, *Made in Abyss* is a popular (if infamous) anime/manga series that looks like a kids' show but quickly reveals itself to be a harrowing dark fantasy about hapless, bright-eyed children exploring the Abyss, a cursed chasm full of treasure, mystery and horrible hyper-evolved predatory creatures. No punches are pulled or bones unbroken as they explore its complex dungeon ecology.

Released on PC and Switch in 2022, the *Made in Abyss* game is an obviously low-budget production, but that doesn't mean low-effort. What

DOMINIC TARASON



THIS MONTH
Plumbed the depths of his Steam backlog

ALSO PLAYED
Sucker For Love: Date To Die For, *Relentless Frontier*

could have been a quick cash-in is a surprisingly intricate survival-crafting and mountaineering sandbox, trading in homesteading for constant, stressful resource management as you route out expeditions, hoard treasure, then begin the (literally) painful ascent to the surface. Represented in horrible detail here is the Curse: a series of afflictions that hit anyone ascending to the surface, including blindness, agonising pain and bleeding from every orifice. How much food *should* you pack to

compensate for six unavoidable rounds of uncontrollable, curse-induced vomiting?

ORPHAN SUFFERING SIM

The *Made in Abyss* game is split into two main parts. The first – Hello Abyss – is an abridged retelling of the anime. The real meat lies in the main campaign – Deep In Abyss – which is a shockingly faithful simulation of the anime's gorgeous watercolour world of child suffering.

This premise allows the game to fill in many of the blanks of the anime and manga, portraying the growth of your orphan from easy prey to hardened adventurer. Each sidequest or treasure brought to the surface provides experience to be spent on incremental but vital upgrades.

Do I recommend *Made in Abyss*? Maybe, at a discount, with full warning of all the jank and frustration ahead. But that's still a recommendation, and there's nothing else quite like it. It's an uncompromising, weirdly compelling dive into darkness, bleeding orifices and all. ■

SIX UNAVOIDABLE ROUNDS OF UNCONTROLLABLE, CURSE-INDUCED VOMITING

OVERWATCH 2

Save me space girl. *By Tyler Colp*

Not since Kiriko has a new *Overwatch* hero single-handedly tanked the queue times in Quick Play. I only managed to get a handful of games in during her Early Access trial (before she arrives in season 12) and I'm certain the wait times are only going to get worse as the trial for Juno, the game's latest support hero, continues. Not only are people clamouring to play her, she might actually be one of the best-designed heroes since *Overwatch 2*'s release.

Juno is a purple-haired, giggly astronaut who many people are comparing to other healers like Ana, Lucio, and Baptiste. On paper, that's basically true: her gun can heal and deal damage and she can move around the map pretty quickly with a double jump and a Hyper Ring ability. But she doesn't feel like any of those heroes at all when you play her.

She's extremely mobile. That's largely due to having a fairly short cooldown on her Glide Boost, a quick burst of horizontal speed that I relied on a lot to escape flanking enemies like Tracers and Echos. It doesn't let you launch into the air – she has the double jump for that – but it does keep her slippery enough to stay

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Blizzard

LINK
overwatch.blizzard.com

alive, which feels in balance with her relatively weak damage output. Juno isn't a killer unless you properly set up a play with her other abilities. Instead, she's much better at maintaining her team's momentum by orbiting around them and picking up the slack when the enemy team has stragglers or when someone on your side needs a quick assist.

Lucio held the throne as the only support in the game who could quickly speed-boost allies into and out of dangerous situations. In *Overwatch 2*, healing alone just doesn't cut it with how lethal DPS heroes are, especially with the anti-healing debuff that their attacks apply. Juno is the first hero since *Overwatch 1* who has a new way to quickly move her team around and it's called Hyper Ring. She can essentially toss down a giant space portal that gives everyone on your team nitrous as they race forward into the fray.

SPACE TRAFFIC CONTROL

The Hyper Ring is Juno's signature ability and it's extremely satisfying

to use. The most obvious use for it is just to catapult your team toward an objective, but it's especially powerful when combined with her ultimate Orbital Ray, which calls down a laser beam that slowly moves forward as it heals and damage-boosts anyone nearby.

A well-timed Hyper Ring and Orbital Ray combo turns the enemy team into bowling pins and your team into one giant bowling ball. *Overwatch* has long struggled with balancing the power of ultimates, and I think Juno's could be the path forward for future heroes. You can only get the most out of it by pulling off a

SHE CAN ESSENTIALLY TOSS DOWN A SPACE PORTAL

smart combination of abilities at the right time, rather than simply hitting Q like an 'I win' button.

PULLING ON THE STRINGS

Juno's role in a team basically turns her into a puppeteer, pulling the strings to keep her allies in motion. She can keep them healthy with her Mediblaster gun, give them speed with her Hyper Ring, bolster them with the healing from her homing Pulsar Torpedoes, and rally everyone around her Orbital Ray ultimate. She may lack the damage output that other healers like Illari have, but she makes up for it in powerful utility and strong healing throughput.

It takes quite a lot of practice to make her kit coalesce because most of her abilities don't make much of an impact alone. Juno's gun can't headshot, so it can be almost impossible to get enough damage in for a kill before your target gets healed and none of her abilities can really save anyone if they're outnumbered. Like Moira and Mercy, the key to Juno is to set yourself up for success before a fight goes awry. She's a brilliant blend of strategy and payoff that makes me miss when *Overwatch* was slow enough to have heroes who could change the course of a match by making a series of smart decisions to push their team toward the win. ■

SHOOTING STAR

Juno's stellar design

1 HELMET

Juno's helmet glows blue in the dark and alters the sound of her voice.

2 MEDIBLASTER

This little peashooter looks more like a tool than a gun, but still packs a punch.

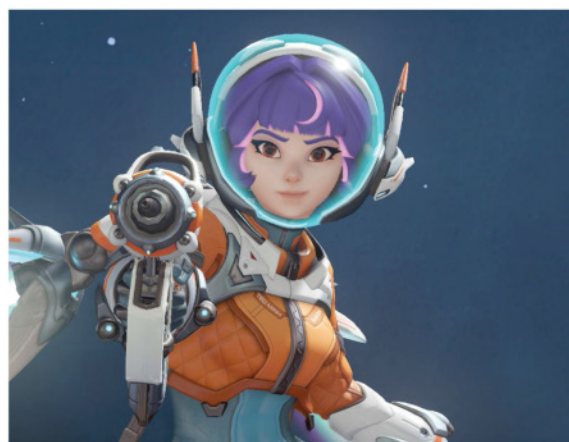
3 SUIT DESIGN

Her orange and teal suit is simple but gives her an aerodynamic look as she floats around.

4 BOOTS

Her big boots have boosters on the bottom that light up when she launches into the air.





ABOVE: Juno is very mobile in-game thanks to a short cooldown on her Glide Boost.

LEFT: Who wouldn't want to kick ass as a purple-haired giggly astronaut?



Juno's Hyper Ring special is very satisfying to use.



THE IMMORTAL LOCK

A massive, meaty game in a single horrific Quake map. *By Dominic Tarason*

Exploring eldritch hell-dungeons is par for the course in *Quake*, but this is the first time the dungeon itself has said “I want to feel you inside me”. Just how far will *Quake*’s hero go on a first date? Welcome to *The Immortal Lock*, likely the largest, fleshiest *Quake* map ever made, and essentially a whole action-horror game in a single contiguous space. Over a year and a half in the making, it’s a harrowing three-to-five-hour experience, potentially much longer depending on how often you die.

You will die, too. This is *Quake* turned up nearly as loud and hard as it goes, so quicksave often. The readme file implores that whatever difficulty you normally play *Quake* on, you’ll want to go one lower, as this is intended to be a harrowing

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 1996

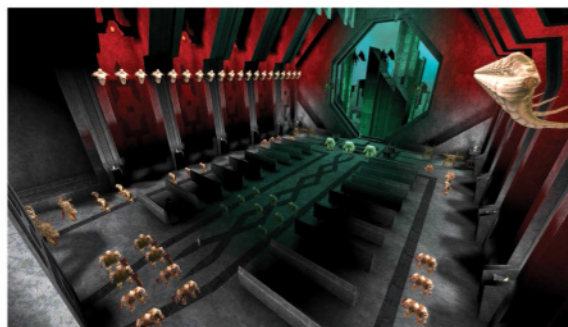
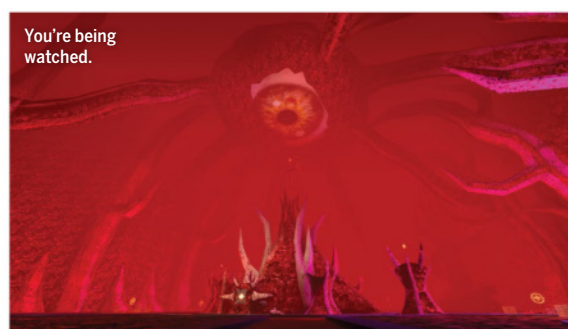
DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
GT Interactive

LINK
quake.bethesda.net/en

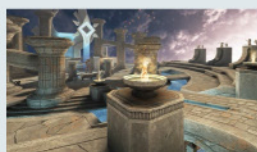
experience. If you’re a beginner or returning old fan, there’s no shame in dialling it down to easy. I usually play on hard, and normal had me sweating through almost every fight and retrying regularly. Brutal, but far from wasted time, as *The Immortal Lock* is an excellent downward spiral into a dimension of yearning meat, backed up by some compelling hidden lore owing to the mapmaker’s primary artistic outlet: surreal horror writing.

The setup is standard enough for *Quake*. An assault research team has gone missing, so they’re sending Ranger (*Quake*’s unnamed protagonist), the Most Badass of Marines, to find out what happened.



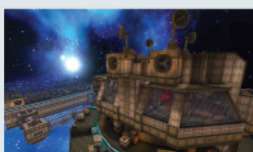
QUAKE 'N BAKE

Looking for more hot Quake mods?



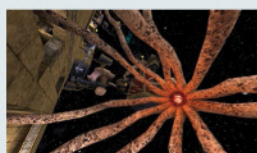
ARCANE DIMENSIONS

A community collaboration with loads of new monsters, weapons, and architecture.



ALKALINE

Enjoy the sick high-tech aesthetic coupled with new enemies and game systems.



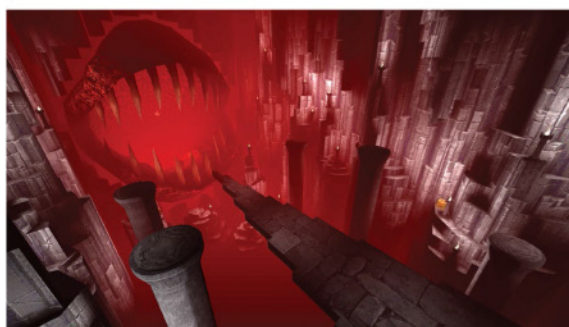
DWELL

Cinematic cosmic horror with Egyptian and Sunken Ruin-themed episodes.



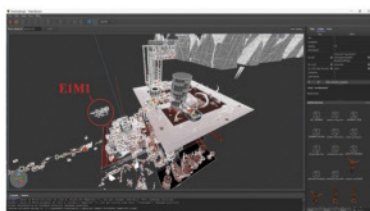
STARSLAVE

A beefy and exploration-heavy adventure that delves into serious cosmic weirdness.



ABOVE: Prepare to get chewed up.

RIGHT: E1M1 is a shoebox, comparatively.



But things escalate quickly and you find yourself in the guts of a living labyrinth that wants to eat you, but also wants you to enjoy the process of being chewed up and digested. The map is roughly broken up into three acts (the third of which is optional and semi-hidden, but well worth discovering), each acting as a non-linear hub consisting of several set-pieces each the size of a small-to-regular Quake map. It seldom repeats tricks despite the fleshy theme.

There's also a huge number of secret areas to discover. While many are just power-ups in dark little nooks, some feel like small, self-contained levels unto themselves. On my first playthrough I only saw a third of them. That enormous sense of scale also applies to the shootouts. Modern Quake maps tend to have higher enemy density than the original but The Immortal Lock takes it to absurd heights, with around 5,200 on Normal difficulty. For comparison's sake, the original game contains 1,340 across its four episodes. Total. This map has more monsters than that in a single blowout set-piece battle, and it's one of the most spectacular fights I've ever experienced in Quake.

Despite the awe-inspiringly excessive scale there's an impressive level of detail and artistry in The Immortal Lock. The Quake engine lends itself to harsh angles and chunky dungeon corridors, and yet much of this adventure is through curving, uneven masses of flesh and bone melded into an impressive array of configurations. Open platforming mazes floating in voids, claustrophobic tomb crawls, the occasional hall made entirely of gnashing, toothsome mouths. It's one of the most unwelcoming environments I've seen in the engine, despite the dungeon's insistence that being consumed should be a fun time for all involved.

You'd think that something of this scale and ambition would come from some ultra-veteran mapper with decades of experience. Instead, The Immortal Lock is the work of a new kid on the block, horror writer and streamer Amelie C Langlois, usually going by the handle 'ComfyByTheFire'. She's only been building Quake maps for two-and-a-half years, and over a year and a half of that was spent on this single map.

"I found probably the nicest and

most supportive community I've ever encountered in the process," Langlois says. "That's what really made me stick to it – all the devs in Quake mapping are super talented and friendly." Langlois first played Quake when she was a kid, which actually turned out to be a formative experience for her horror writing – something she's been doing far longer than mapping Quake.

"I think I must have gotten it as a gift when I was six or seven, and played it on the family computer. Stuff like that, Silent Hill and the Goosebumps books pushed me into really getting a taste for surreal horror, so I eventually started writing it for fun at around the same age."

With The Immortal Lock, she deliberately set out to make a splash. "Part of my intent was actually to do the largest Quake map ever made,"



A DOWNWARD SPIRAL INTO A DIMENSION OF YEARNING MEAT

she said. "At least in terms of actual gameplay area – Ter Shibboleth technically is still larger in size because it uses giant brush-based expanses as artificial skyboxes."

MEAT FUTURES

This wasn't her first mapmaking experience period – before Quake, she worked in StarCraft, Warcraft 3 and StarCraft 2. Langlois recommends that anyone interested in starting Quake mapping should use Trenchbroom, a powerful and new-ish level editor she described as "ridiculously user-friendly".

Langlois also has no plans to slow down. Just two days after The Immortal Lock was released, she had already rolled out three updates. She's also drawing up plans to host a community Meat Jam; a showcase of squishy, gory environments using Quoth, the gameplay mod that The Immortal Lock draws its new monsters and power-ups from. Then there's an even more ambitious sequel – The Inversion Chamber – featuring some light RPG elements. Given that The Immortal Lock took over a year to make, it might take a while for that to appear. ■



TRIUMPH IN

TOTAL WAR: PHARAOH DYNASTIES

Dive into the massive game-changing update. *By Sean Martin*

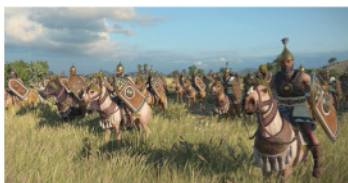
NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Total War: Pharaoh
review:
[pcgamer.com/
total-war-pharaoh-
review](http://pcgamer.com/total-war-pharaoh-review)



HORUS-ING AROUND

1 If you've grown tired of the infantry and chariot fight in *Pharaoh*, the good news is that *Dynasties* has added cavalry. You can now use your horsemen to flank plus hammer and anvil into the back of enemy lines to your heart's content – they even added horse archers.



POP THE QUESTION

2 Remember that tying the knot is a great opportunity to strengthen diplomatic relations. Want to befriend a powerful neighbour so you don't have to worry about invasion? Use the new Diplomatic Marriage action to soften relations with the faction.



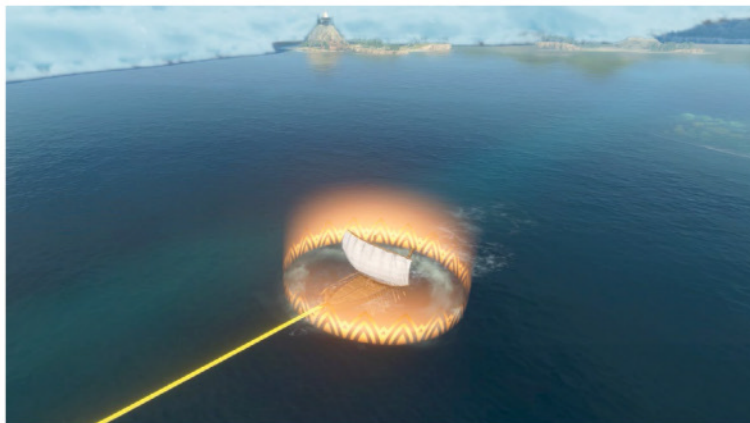
MEMENTO MORI

3 Since faction leaders can now die in *Dynasties*, you'll want to protect your king. Birth a big family and get your generals some XP in case they have to take over. Be wary of assassination in your Court – use the Gossip action to find plots and then nip them in the bud.



MY GOD

4 With new Aegean and Mesopotamian deities to steal, your choice of god has never been more important. Pick an almighty who complements your playstyle, build temples to gain favour and dedicate a general to gain benefits.



SMOOTH SAILING

5 The new Sea Lanes mechanic means your armies can move faster when at sea. This is helpful as the Babylonians trying to defend their river empire, or as the Aegeans setting out across the sea to despoil foreign shores.



SMALL BEGINNINGS

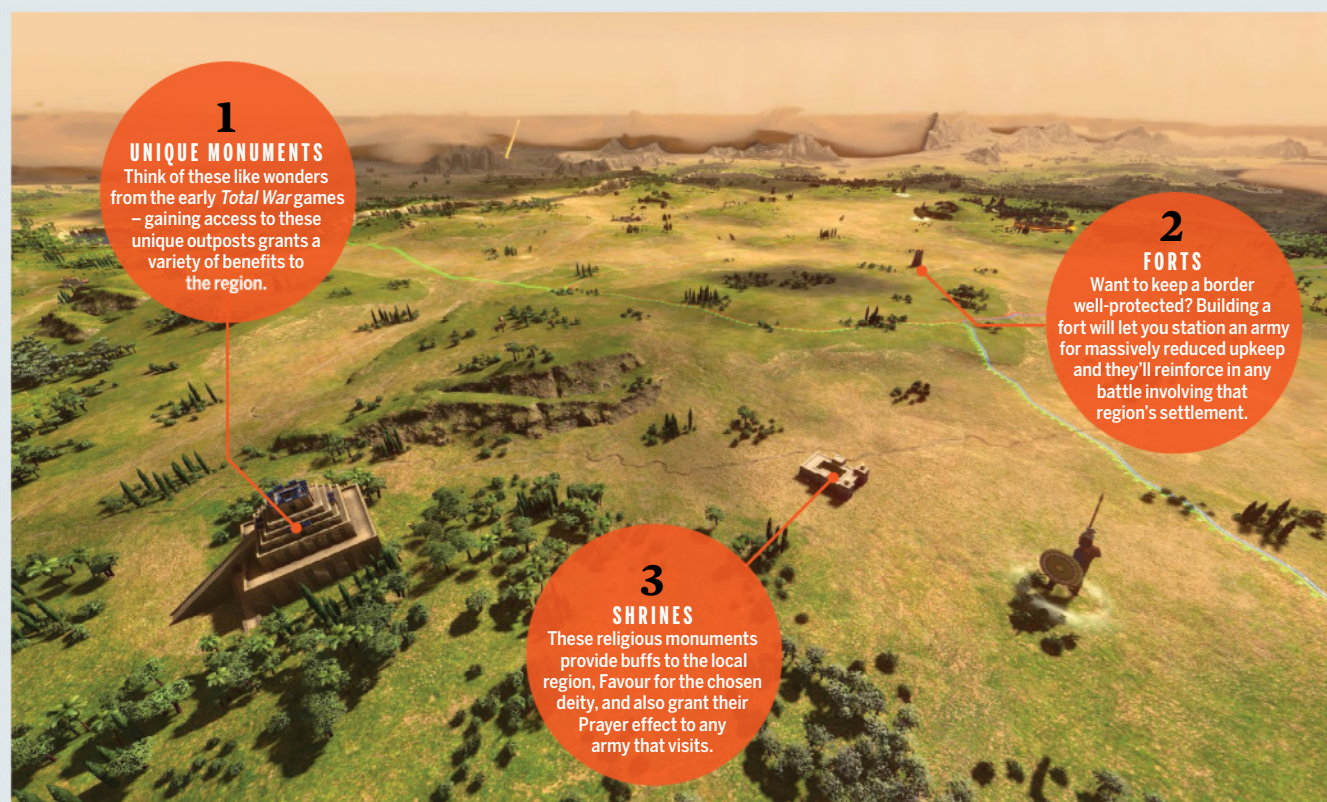
6 Just like in classic *Total War* games, *Dynasties* gives you the option to play as minor factions. They may not have the glitz and glamour of a unique faction leader's mechanics, but they provide a more varied range of starting positions.



LEGIT

7 As with Diplomatic Marriages, you can now barter to gain Legitimacy from other factions as you would with any other resource. This will help you rise through the ranks faster, challenge the current leader and gain powerful royal powers as you accumulate more.

PYRAMID SCHEMES *Build these outposts to bolster your provinces*



1

UNIQUE MONUMENTS

Think of these like wonders from the early *Total War* games – gaining access to these unique outposts grants a variety of benefits to the region.

2

FORTS

Want to keep a border well-protected? Building a fort will let you station an army for massively reduced upkeep and they'll reinforce in any battle involving that region's settlement.

3

SHRINES

These religious monuments provide buffs to the local region. Favour for the chosen deity, and also grant their Prayer effect to any army that visits.



LAY OF THE LAND

8 Using terrain to your advantage is the key to victory in *Pharaoh*. When attacking a walled settlement for instance, try leaving your ladders by the wall, and hiding the bulk of your forces in long grass ready to surprise the enemy. You can also use terrain to slow enemies.



DISASTER ZONE

9 The bad news is that natural disasters in *Dynasties* impact far larger areas, so squirrel away some resources for repairs. On the plus side, you can now interact with marauding invasion armies in diplomacy, giving you a chance to appease or redirect their wrath.



DEATH FROM ABOVE

10 Slingers, archers and javelin throwers are pretty deadly in *Pharaoh*, but they have a tendency to hit your units as well, especially when firing from behind infantry. In *Dynasties*, you can swap between different shot types for variable range and trajectory.



RICH PICKINGS

11 Resources are just as important in *Dynasties* as they are in the base game. Conquering full provinces is important, but keep an eye out for gold, bronze, stone and wood settlements you can snatch up, giving you access to these building and unit upkeep resources early.



SMART TRADE

12 Remember that you can barter in diplomacy. Look for factions that have an abundance of the resource you want and scarcity in a resource you have. It'll also help you get a good deal if they happen to like you, so try to be a good neighbour.



FALLOUT 4: LUCKY BASTARD

PART 2

Survival difficulty strikes back. *By Rick Lane*

Do you ever have an idea that you later come to regret? Have you ever cursed the day you decided that was a good use of your time? Have you ever found yourself lying awake at night, wishing you could invent a time machine so you could go back and punch yourself in your own stupid, fat head?

Why am I asking these questions? Oh, no real reason. On an unrelated note, here's the second part of my attempt to play *Fallout 4* on survival difficulty with a luck build.

When we last left it, my undeservingly fortunate character Phil Icitous had just rinsed a power plant clean of raider scum, and was planning a little trip to Diamond City to look for his missing baby boy. One uneventful trek south later, I arrive at the former Boston Red Sox stadium, eagerly anticipating the next adventure. Fast forward a few plot developments, and I'm tasked with finding Nick Valentine, who has gone missing. Silly detective! That's the opposite of what you're supposed to do.

Seriously though, Nick is probably my favourite part of *Fallout 4*, and I can't wait to add him to my companion roster. The synth detective was last seen entering a subway station on the other side of town, which is about a five-minute run as the stingwing flies.

The first time I try to make the run across town, I foolishly decide to do a bit of exploring, which earns me a fancy lead-based brain implant from a group of raiders. Fair enough, that one's on me. The second time I make a beeline for the station, but I get creamed by a bunch of ghouls that ambush me from underneath a pile of wrecked cars. Haha, good joke *Fallout 4*, but you can only tell it once! On the third run, I manage to take out the ghouls, but then Dogmeat gets aggro'd by some raiders on a rooftop, and in trying to rescue him, I get knocked off a ledge and fall to my death. The fourth time, well, I just get randomly blown up by a grenade. Not especially interesting, but intensely annoying.

Finally, on the fifth try running down this one street, I make it to the subway station. "Hurrah!" I think. "The hard part's over!" I then take precisely three steps past the turnstiles before I'm turned into instamash by a ghoul with a Tommy gun.

I'd like to say I saw sense and stopped there. But sense is for the unfortunate, and I gamble on this quest three more times before finally giving up. Part of the problem is there are no beds between Diamond City and the subway, which means I can't save and which leaves a lot of room for things to go wrong. The bigger problem, though, is that right now I'm just too squishy to pursue the main quest any further. I tried to skip the queue, and *Fallout 4* has quite rightly come down on me with hammers.

PALADIN DENSE OR PALADIN DUNCE

Fortunately, it means there's plenty of stuff to do further

THE BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL IS BEING BESIEGED BY LARGE PACKS OF GHOULS

north that should be more my speed. I head back to Lexington, and do a bit of shopping-slash-pest control at the local Super Duper Mart. The place is riddled with ghouls, but a few Molotov cocktails and a helping hand from a Securitron bot helps me clear the place without too much embarrassment.

Then I head back south to Cambridge, where a rummage through the local Red Rocket truck stop nets me a snazzy new hunting rifle, perfect for killing things from a distance like the natural coward that I am. After this, I respond to an emergency radio broadcast from the nearby police station, where the Brotherhood of Steel is being besieged by large packs of ghouls.

Now, I'm not sure where exactly the Brotherhood sits on the moral compass, so I don't know what kind of choice helping them qualifies as. But at the moment, my priority is levelling my character up. Besides, a big problem with *Fallout 4* is that often the worst thing you can say to someone is 'no', which is A) a bad thing to teach your kids, and B) makes for a deeply uneventful RPG. Also, the leader of this group of brothers, Paladin Danse, looks like he'd be an excellent person to hide behind while I reap a bunch of XP from all those ghouls.

So I rush into the fray, and bravely defend the Paladin from three feet behind his back.

Even with several brothers fighting by my side, it's a tough battle. But we prevail. Then Danse asks me if I'll help him rescue several more brothers from a nearby facility named ArcJet Systems. Short of having my own suit of power armour, this is the best chance I'll have at earning some proper XP from a quest, so I agree.

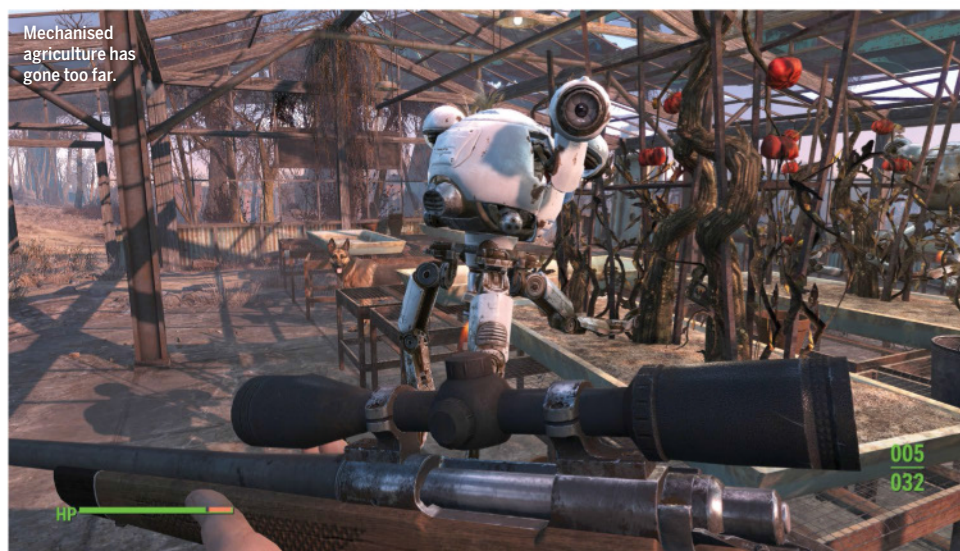
It is, as Danse puts it, a "short hike" from Cambridge PD to ArcJet. Along the way, we encounter a large group of raiders hiding under a bridge. Danse eliminates them with such brutal efficiency I only manage to pop a single head with my hunting rifle. Now we're cooking. Well, Danse is. I'm merely chopping the vegetables. ➤

THE RULES

1. Survival mode: that means no quicksaves.

2. Luck build: perks for more crits and items.

3. 'Evil' choices: bad guys have more fun.



Approaching ArcJet, we clear up a few feral dogs and bloatflies. As the facility's vast grey bulk looms over us, my excitement shifts toward apprehension. This is an even longer road than between Diamond City and the Subway, and like that run, there are no beds for me to save at.

It's alright though. Danse will protect me. Quietly, we enter ArcJet. The lobby area is silent, and cluttered with detritus. Gingerly, I step forward, as Danse mutters gravely about the dangers that might lie ahead. Then I hear the door open again. I turn around. Danse is gone.

I race outside and glance around, only to spot Danse hightailing it toward the horizon like a rabbit with its arse on fire. I follow as he gallops across the wasteland, so baffled that I holler in real life for him to stop. It isn't long before my puny character's lungs give out, and by the time my fatigue is recovered, Danse is dust.

Something isn't right here. After a little research, I discover that this bizarre turn of events is caused by a bug. It's wild to me that, eight years after launch, a game like *Fallout 4* can have a bug like this in such a major questline. "But don't worry!" the internet reassures me. "You can still play the game to completion. All you have to do is complete the ArcJet quest without Danse's help!"

OH GOODY

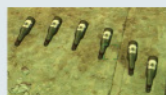
Trudging back into ArcJet, I proceed carefully through its corridors. Eventually, I come to a control panel that sits opposite a fancy-looking door, with bay windows on either side. It looks very much like a door designed for keeping something in, so I lay a couple of frag mines in front of it before using the computer terminal to open it.

The second I do so, a group of synths spills out out to attack me. Two of them are obliterated by the frag mines. But a third survives the explosion, rushing me with a melee weapon. I target the synth in VATS and am given a brief reprieve when the Mysterious Stranger shows up and stylishly dispatches the synth.

Yet more are coming. I beat a swift retreat, hoping they'll stop chasing me if I leave ArcJet. That hope is quickly dashed, and I end up following Danse's footsteps as I'm chased across the wasteland by naked robot men. Finally, my fatigue gives out once more, and a blow to the head sends me all the way back to the Police Station.

WASTELAND SURVIVAL GUIDE: ADDENDUM

Advanced tips for getting by in survival mode



COLLECT BOTTLES
Bottles can be filled with purified water at a pump, making them more useful than their 'junk' status.



USE THROWABLES
Grenades and molotovs are essential for dealing with tougher foes.



TAKE DRUGS!
Survival mode requires you to take every edge you can. Drugs like Jet can really help in a pinch.



VISIT THE DOC
Diseases are common, but healing at the doctor in Diamond City will cure anything.

SHOWING SOME BOTTLE

This is how the next ten hours of play go, with me pinballing across the north of the Wasteland, looking for something I can do and being rebuffed at every turn. I try pursuing the Minutemen questline, but this leads me to a water treatment centre filled with Super Mutants, and fighting them goes about as well as you'd expect.

I then try heading northeast, toward Salem. This plan fares better. I get into a few fights I can actually manage, and loot a crashed aeroplane filled with goodies. But then, as I take a well-earned rest inside a not-at-all-creepy abandoned graveyard, I come down with the 'Weakness' illness, which bites a huge chunk out of my already anaemic encumbrance limit. With no antibiotics to cure it, I'm forced to hike back to Diamond City to find a doctor.

In a roundabout way, this proves fortuitous. After taking my medicine, I rest up at the Dugout inn. While there, the bartender starts grousing about Diamond City Radio's pathetic DJ, Travis Miles, and asks me if I'd be up for getting him off the air permanently. Hold the phone! Is *Fallout 4* asking me to do something bad? Finally!

But oh no, it turns out Vadim is just joking, ha ha. What he really wants me to do is instil some confidence in the timid radio host. Lame. But then he says it'll involve deliberately causing a fistfight in the bar. Not only is that less lame, it's also something I might be able to succeed at.

I head out for a bit, smell the irradiated roses, and

come back in the evening. Travis is there, getting picked on by a group of toughs. I wade in and start riling them up. Due to my lack of physical stats, I am concerned that when the fight starts, I'll get punched once and launched through the roof. But I needn't worry, because the moment fists are raised, Travis whips out a pipe-pistol and wastes those suckers.

I'm not entirely sure what's happened. It appears the fight turned lethal at some point, but I never equipped a weapon myself. Did I accidentally punch a man to death? Either way, Vadim chews me out for turning his bar into an abattoir. Hey man, I'm not the one who suddenly went all Rambo in a baseball jacket.

Naturally, because this is a Bethesda game, the massacre is swiftly brushed over, and Vadim's

BELOW: Yeah, let's all point guns at this guy!





ABOVE: That's a bad case of Bethesda face.

VADIM HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED BY FRIENDS OF THE THUGS THAT TRAVIS SLAUGHTERED

attention turns to the next phase of the quest, getting a girl to go out with Travis. This takes all of five minutes; Travis is the new hotness now that he's murdered several dudes. When I get back, however, it's revealed Vadim has been kidnapped by friends of the thugs that Travis slaughtered, and is being held in a nearby brewery. Great, another large industrial complex filled with dangerous enemies for me to walk into, and this time I don't have any Power Armour to protect me. But since I still haven't been given any XP for all this running around yet, I don't have much choice.

At least Travis agrees to help me, which is a relief given that beneath the shy exterior is a merciless killing machine that'd give the Terminator a run for his money. We rendezvous at the brewery entrance, and sneak in. I almost trip over a raider sleeping on a mattress near the entrance, and waste him before he gets up. I try taking a quick nap to save, but there are too many enemies nearby. It feels like *Fallout 4* is teasing me at this point, waving dirty mattresses under my nose.

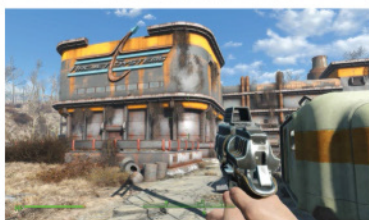
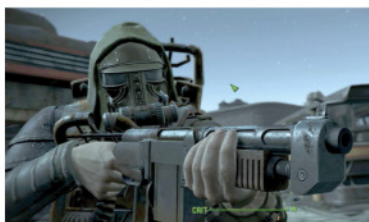
Inside the brewing hall, I fully expect to be obliterated the moment

I peek out from cover. But I'm spared an ignominious death by the layout of the complex. Stood atop a gantry interspersed by support beams, I'm protected from the raiders below and on the gantry opposite, while Dogmeat and Travis help secure the flanks. So positioned, I can take out most of the raiders with my hunting rifle, and a few breaths of Jet (which slows down time) gives me plenty of room to steady my aim.

Moving with all the haste of a tortoise, I make it all the way to the final room, where one raider remains. I raise my rifle, pull the trigger, and hear a soul-destroying click. With no time to reload, I whip out my 10mm pistol and hit VATS. Even three headshots won't put down the raider, but I'm out of options, so I hit execute and wait to die.

On the second-to-last shot, the Mysterious Stranger appears, and puts that final raider down. It doesn't feel like I got lucky so much that the game has shown mercy to me.

Fifteen hours on since I set out to rescue Nick Valentine, I have finally completed one quest. Survival difficulty has truly put me through the wringer on this one, although the bag of spanners Bethesda habitually throws into its games hasn't exactly helped. So far, my takeaway is that luck is no replacement for preparation in the apocalypse. Yet despite this miserable escapade, I feel like a tipping point is coming, where the dice will, finally, start to roll in my favour. ■





WHY I LOVE

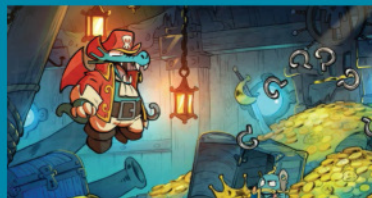
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

FLICKING BETWEEN

ORIGINAL AND REMASTERED GRAPHICS

Embrace your inner art critic with gaming's greatest toggle.

By James Nouch



LEFT: A rare glimpse into Gabe Newell's money chamber.

RIGHT: Remastering cutscenes well is an artform. New assets have to retain the flavour of the old.



I am staring intently at a wall. Periodically, I stroke my chin and make a noise that suggests intense artistic consideration. Maybe a thoughtful “hmmmm”, a loaded “oh I see”, or even a private little chuckle to myself (as if to say: how droll this videogame wall is. If you don’t find this wall droll it must be because you’re a hopeless rustic).

This is the power that comes with the ability to toggle between classic, old-school visuals and the spruced up graphics of a modern-day remaster. On the face of it, it’s a pretty unglamorous feature – ‘toggle’, after all, is a candidate for the least sexy word in the English language. But when this function is mapped to a single key, you’re given the tools to play art critic in a complex work of digital restoration.

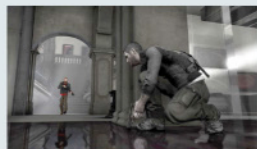
And that’s what’s brought me to this wall. Poring over every crevice and bulkhead of the Pillar of Autumn as part of *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, I can compare and contrast two visions of what this game should look like. Inevitably, the original visuals are a little fuzzier, a little simpler. The remastered textures, meanwhile, are packed with detail. I limber up my chin-stroking fingers, and ask myself which I prefer.

On this occasion, I conclude that the cleaner, more understated look of Bungie’s original texture work wins out (and I pronounce this with all the weight and ceremony of a Turner Prize judge). But the opportunities for this kind of comparison don’t end there – they stretch across every detail of the game. From the plates of the Master Chief’s armour, to the crystalline spines of a Needler, you get to see the fingerprints of different artists on every one of them.

It’s often said that a good remake should look the way you remember the original game. The job of the

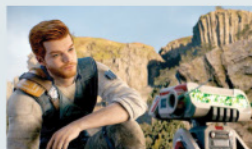
TOGGLE DEFENDER

Four more toggle-able features



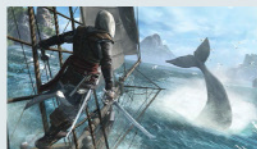
CROUCHING

I realise that squatting is tiring, but don’t make my feeble pinky hold the Ctrl key.



SPIDERS

Such is the power of toggles that *Jedi Survivor* lets you de-spider-ify its arachnoid enemies.



SING-SONGS

Assassin's Creed 4 had a toggle to disable shanties. Activating this is unforgivable.



SUBTITLES

Imagine a world where you have to hold a button whenever you want closed captions to appear.

artists and developers remastering a game, then, is partly technical and partly Proustian. As well as the humdrum business of fixing compatibility bugs and adding widescreen support, we’re expecting these studios to make us feel the way

A GOOD REMAKE SHOULD LOOK THE WAY YOU REMEMBER THE ORIGINAL

we did when we were fitter, better-looking, and decades further from the grave. It’s a big ask.

Occasionally, that gulf between your nostalgic memories and the onscreen reality can be wonderfully jarring, in part because we’re so quick to acclimatise to the worlds we’re exploring. Playing *Tomb Raider I-III Remastered* for a couple of hours before switching back to the PS1-era

original graphics is enough to elicit a shudder of shock, “Is that really what this game looked like?”

Placing the old and new side-by-side like this, without requiring players to restart the game or even hop into a menu first, is what brings contrast so vividly to the fore.

PLAYING FOR TIME

And then there’s the technical feat that all this graphical switching surely represents. Now, I can’t claim to know how challenging it is to implement a feature like this, but I do know that it feels like an impressive technical accomplishment. Partly, that’s down to the sense that two different versions of the same game are running at once, one carefully balanced on top of the other.

But another part of the appeal is the fact that this is such a game-specific solution to the challenges of preserving digital media. Sure, you can watch a Blu-ray re-release of a pre-war movie and even settle in for some featurettes on the restoration process, but that’s not the same experience as a videogame remaster.

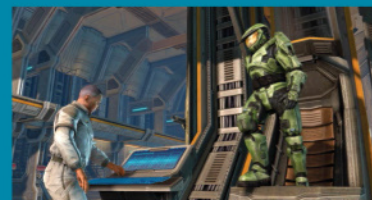
When I play the remastered versions of *Diablo II*, *Full Throttle*, or *Halo*, I’m moving through spaces at a pace I dictate, switching between the graphics of yesterday and today as I please. In the space of a single minute, I can marvel at the quality of a remastered landscape, headshot an Elite and then switch back to 2001-o-vision to stick a plasma grenade to his buddy’s stupid wort-ing head. I can play with the remastered visuals in the same way that I can play with everything else that makes this a game.

And that’s why taking the toggle out of the menus and mapping it onto a button is so powerful – it’s a way of announcing that this feature is part of your arsenal as a player. How you use it, of course, is up to you. For my part, I’ve got some more bulkheads to admire. ■



LEFT: Just popping out to pick up the latest issue of PC Gamer magazine.

RIGHT: It’s not pretty, but these OG graphics somehow just feel right.





Enough complex machinery under the hood to make Daedalus blush



HADES

Genius in every flaming step. *By Harvey Randall*

When *Hades 2* released into Early Access this year, 34 hours of my life vanished before I said, “OK, if I play any more I’m going to spoil myself rotten, and the full thing won’t be out for ages yet. Time to stop”.

I put down my controller. My hands began to itch, and I broke out into a feverish sweat. I felt the flames of Asphodel lick at my heels – the bloody waters of the Styx filled my mouth, and a deep, thunderous voice chastised me. “You didn’t finish me, boy,” it rumbled like a disappointed father. Flashes of hot, topless gods raked across my vision as I toppled into an abyss of my mind’s own creation. I then immediately reinstalled *Hades 1*, picked up my controller, and played about 40 more hours of that.

The sheer hunger *Hades 2* inspired in me had me so ravenous for more of developer Supergiant’s quality work that I couldn’t help but tuck in. Especially since I’d never quite finished the dang thing: I’d beaten papa Hades himself, but I’d never completed the roguelike enough times to see the end of its main story, nor had I dug properly into its postgame.

Hades, in its now-finished state, gave me a singular thought: this might be one of the smartest roguelikes – nay, one of the smartest games I’d ever played. *Hades* feels effortlessly good, but there’s enough complex machinery under the hood to make Daedalus blush.

ROGUELITE REVOLUTION

Hades is a roguelike – or more accurately, it’s a roguelite. In case you’re completely green to the world

of keyboards and thumbsticks, that means it’s a game where death sends you back to the start, as per 1980’s *Rogue*. However, ‘lite’ refers to the way its persistent set of upgrades – earned with resources snagged on your runs – make each run both easier and more complex.

‘Persistent’ is a great word to describe *Hades*, actually, because Supergiant – not content with merely making some of the most impactful, beautiful, and incredibly scored indie titles out there like *Bastion*, *Transistor* or *Pyre* – decided to push the boundaries of what a roguelite can do.

Chiefly, *Hades* tells a compelling, linear RPG narrative despite always kicking you back to the start, which – until it arrived on the scene – was a complete rarity for a genre that had relied on procedural storytelling for years.

As I’ve grown older and more dependent on sleep (ah, how I miss those halcyon 3am gaming nights),

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
Supergiant Games

PUBLISHER
Supergiant Games

LINK
supergiantgames.com



Alright, no need to rub it in, dad.



HADES
GOD OF THE DEAD

Stupid boy. I told you nobody gets out of here, whether alive or dead. Though, how was your wanton ransacking of my domain?

✦ I've also had to stop reading books before bed. It helps not to stimulate my brain right before I catch some Zs – but I mainly had to kick the habit because books that are page turners, inevitably, are going to make you want to keep turning pages. Who knew?

Instead of resetting the world and its stakes every time you die, *Hades* pulls the ingenious move of making every death diegetic. Zagreus can't exactly die – so whenever you run the poor sod into a spike trap, he gets

flung into the river Styx to be sheepishly coughed up back at his estranged father's domicile. This allows *Hades* to tell its story – over 300,000 words of it – between runs. It creates a delightfully hellish cycle of fight, die, read, fight and die again.

Which means that, in its own way, *Hades* is a page turner just like the novels that were killing my sleep schedule – while embarking on another Sisyphean romp through *Hades'* underworld is far tougher than flicking to the next page, the

emotional sensation is much the same. I wanted to get to the next bit, and who needs sleep, anyway? Me. I did. I didn't get much, though.

However, it's the whirring gears behind *Hades'* storytelling that really turned me into an obsessive – it's nothing short of revolutionary for the genre, setting out a template that many roguelikes have tried to emulate since.

STORY BEAT, REPEAT

In People Make Games' excellent video *The System Behind Hades'* Astounding Dialogue, creative director Greg Kasavin lays out the game's secret recipe: *Hades* randomly assigns lists of potential conversation topics to every social interaction you have. From there, it sorts what conversations do and don't happen in two different ways.

Firstly, *Hades* locks conversations behind specific circumstances. Nothing too wild there. Then it assigns a priority system to those conversations to ensure they're delivered appropriately. The example of a high-priority conversation the video gives as an example is, naturally, beating your first run of the game. High off the adrenaline of teaching your old man

SMARTYANTS STORYTELLING

How Hades keeps you on-track

1 DIALOGUE

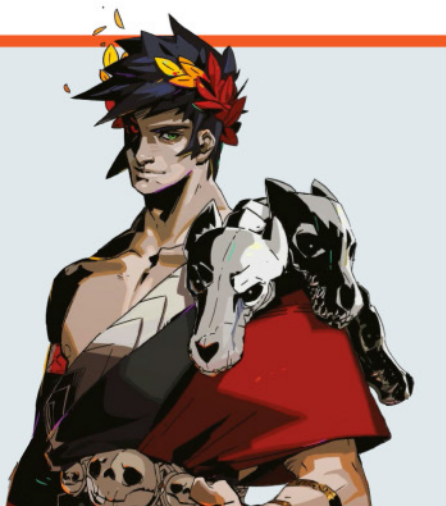
Hades keeps a list of potential dialogue for every character on tap.

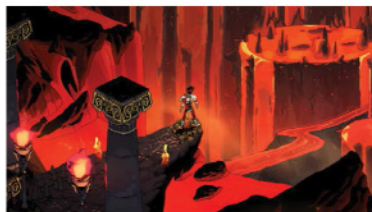
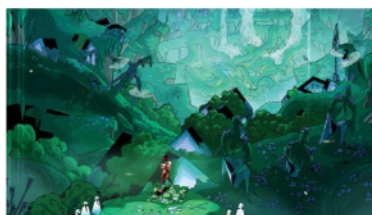
2 SCENES

Then, *Hades* locks and unlocks scenes based on your actions.

3 PRIORITY

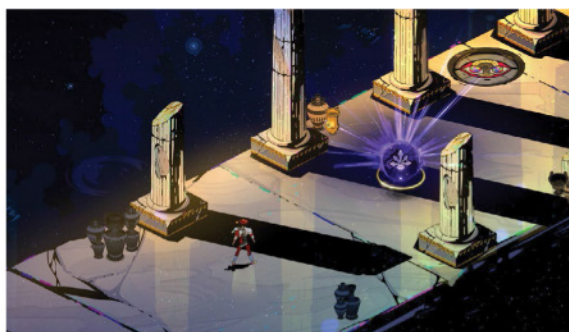
Lastly, it gives every scene a priority to keep things moving.





ABOVE: The floor is, quite literally, lava.

RIGHT: Chaos calls.



a lesson, any *Hades* player will want the entire world to react to your achievement instead of, say, getting your mitts on a new sword. This forges a sense of linear progression through the game's narrative that stops it from buckling under the weight of variable player speeds.

I was hot shit after gorging on *Hades 2*, beating up my (Zagreus') dad in about 12 attempts. Despite this, I never felt like I was actively missing anything. The story (which certainly doesn't stop after your first win) proceeded at a perfectly acceptable rate through the character arcs, plotlines, and romances therein.

So – *Hades* spins a good yarn in a genre not built for it, making use of some very clever techniques to great effect. But it's a videogame, I hear you ask, what about the 'game' bit? Gods being good, it holds up in the realms of mechanical design and combat with similar ingenuity, too.

BOONS, BEAUTIFUL BOONS

Hades is downright slick to play: Zagreus turns on a dime, he does exactly what you want him to do, and the room for skill expression is huge. But its boons system – aside from being a nice way to tie in further story beats (since it lets you

STOPS IT FROM BUCKLING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF VARIABLE PLAYER SPEEDS

chat to the gods) is also a great way to divide the cognitive load of putting a build together.

Once you grab a boon from a certain god, there's some behind-the-scenes wizardry going on that 'locks' that god into one of four slots – if my first four boon choices are from Zeus, Ares, Aphrodite and Poseidon, I'll only get upgrades from that quartet for the rest of my attempt (keepsakes, which you're able to equip in-between zones, can bump that limit up to five or six). Chaos, fittingly, doesn't factor into this system.

This is ingenious for three separate reasons. First, it means that you'll naturally encounter synergies every time – especially when duo boons enter the scene. Despite having a pool of ten gods to choose from, you're rarely left up Styx creek without a paddle.

Secondly, this very same boon system simplifies the game for newer players, making each run a tutorial that teaches you about

four specific Olympians' shticks, compartmentalising the absolutely heretical amount of build diversity inherent to the game.

The third reason is that, once you really start getting into the nitty-gritty of aiming for certain builds, you can remove the amount of luck required to do so. This rewards experienced players with the keys to the city – savvy boon choice nets you some incredible power.

These three design elements are far from the only things that make 2020's *Hades* a masterwork, but to get into all the rest of it would require more pages than I've been given to talk about them.

I've enjoyed the game's sequel – but part of my patience in refusing to sink another 30 hours into the thing until it's done baking is, in part, now fuelled by a desire the first game has instilled in me.

I want to see just how Supergiant manages to tie *Hades 2*'s more disparate, complex mechanics into a beautiful whole, and while it's already a pretty frictionless experience in the Early Access version, I know this dev's pedigree enough by now to realise that I'm only seeing the scaffolding. All of this to say: cor, *Hades* is bloody clever. ■

TED LITCHFIELD



Many experts agree this was an *Elden Ring* summer, but some are saying it could also be a *Thief* mod summer or even a *Felvidek* summer – there's a lotta good games to play.



ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

eldenring.com

→ Hey, have you heard of this one? It's a pretty good action RPG that hasn't been getting much attention. I have put 100 hours into this expansion across two characters and I need to put it on the shelf for a while. I highly recommend Rakshasa's Great Katana, however.



THIEF: THE BLACK PARADE

moddb.com/mods/thief-the-black-parade

→ An unofficial expansion to *Thief Gold* made by a supergroup of fan mission modders, including a level designer at Arkane Lyon. The missions are massive, varied and shockingly creative, with an inspired story too. The only thing missing is Stephen Russell's Garrett.



DREAD DELUSION

dreadxp.com/dread-delusion

→ *Dread Delusion* has some rough edges, but it's an engrossing RPG that poses some vexing moral quandaries in a fantasy setting that I just can't get out of my head. Come for the vibes, stay for the quest involving a human meat alternative farmed by a zombie society.



FELVIDEK

x.com/brozef_

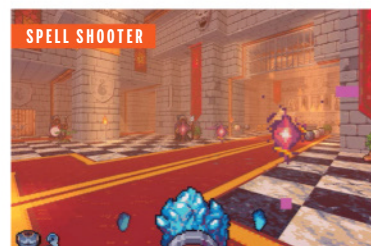
→ Taking the 'J' out of JRPG: the *Dragon Quest* turn-based combat is as trad as it gets, but instead of anime adventures, it underpins a grounded tale set in the Slovak highlands of the 15th century. Things take a turn for the supernatural in this standout \$11 heater.

MUST

PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

by Ted Litchfield



WIZORDUM

x.com/wizordum

→ Like *Heretic*, but bright and cute! *Wizordum* just got its second episode in Early Access, and this medieval wizard FPS also has a level editor for making your own creations or sampling those of other gamers, in addition to an online leaderboard for level clear times.



ANGER FOOT

devolverdigital.com/games/anger-foot

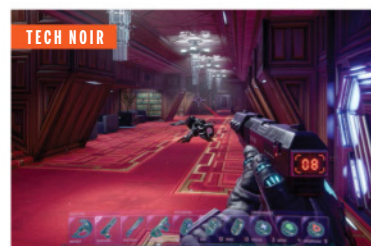
→ First-person *Hotline Miami* from the people who made *Broforce*. Alternately: *Neon White* with significantly less platforming. *Anger Foot* has that kind of trance-inducing time trial gameplay in really short levels, but also kept pleasantly surprising me the entire way through.



FALLEN ACES

x.com/NewBlood

→ Another example of 'immersive sim, but let's have some fun with it'. While you can stealth ghost your way through its sprawling levels, you'd be depriving yourself of a satisfying melee combo system. Take advantage of its non-lethal weapons – these goons are pretty charming.



SYSTEM SHOCK REMAKE

systemshock.primematter.gg

→ We're a year out from the original release of this stellar reimagining of the 1994 classic, but the addition of an improved final level and female protagonist option have me jonesin' for a replay. Incredible atmosphere, challenging exploration and gunplay lightyears ahead of the OG.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

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Strategic Director Evan Lahti

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CONTRIBUTORS

Matt Elliott, Phil Iwaniuk, Dominic Tarason, Tom Sykes, Ian Evenden, Luke Kemp, Rick Lane, James Nouch, Justin Wagner, Marco Zangirolami, Jon Bailes

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor	Steve Wright
Editorial Operations	Sebastian Hue

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer	Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations	David Lyttleton

PRODUCTION

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Advertising Production Manager	Joanne Crosby
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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE LAST GOOD KILLSTREAK** [PART 2]

The pain was incredible and I slumped, like a ragdoll discarded by a child, down the back of the workbench, Betty Sue's knife cleanly sliding out of my side. My .38 Special revolver fell from my hand as I went down, clattering onto the workbench's metal top and then, with a dull thud, onto the dirty concrete floor of the abandoned Sega warehouse.

"Dick, Dick, Dick..." Betty Sue tutted, as she paced over to the revolver, picking it up. "Why oh why did you think you could come here?" Looking up, blood running down my hands, I saw Betty Sue clearly for the first time. The blonde curls from the picture her mother had shown me had gone, replaced by a razor-sharp black bob. So too had the kind, hopeful eyes of that picture's young woman, replaced now with a malicious gleam as they peered down the barrel of the gun towards me. "Then again, I'd expect nothing else from a PC gamer."

"Betty Sue, this is madness, what are you doing?" I replied, struggling to remain conscious, "Your mother, Rosie, hired me, she's desperate to find you. I'm here to bring you home, Betty Sue." Upon saying this, though, Betty Sue rapidly closed the gap and squeezed the barrel of the revolver to my forehead. "Help me, Ray-Tracing," she spat. "Well you can't help me now, it's too late, the die is cast. I wanted to be a PC gamer so bad, to write for PC Gamer magazine or make my own PC games, but mother wouldn't allow it. So I ran away to the big smoke to chase my dream. That's when the CGC picked me up. I was console gaming within days..." she petered out. Then the anger returned, "And where were you while this was happening, Dick? While I fell? That's right, Dick Ray-Tracing, you're no hero."

It was a tale as old as videogaming. A bright young PC gamer with so much to offer, corrupted by the easy, cheap thrills of console gaming. Damn it, she was right. "Betty Sue, I'm sorry," I said between coughs. "You're right, it didn't have to be like this. But look, it's not too late, I can help you return to where you belong, to the one true PC gaming faith."

"You know, Dick," Betty Sue replied, pulling the revolver's barrel away from my forehead and taking a pace or two back. "The cake is a lie, right? There is no one true PC gaming faith, and as soon as platform war dinosaurs like you, Ray-Tracing, are put down for good, we'll emerge into a wondrous new gaming future. So," she said, raising the revolver to my head once more, "I'll see you in hell, Dick." It was then that Dogulus Rift attacked.

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